

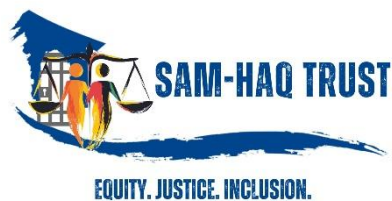


I EXIST

**LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PEOPLE IN
DESTITUTION**

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LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PEOPLE IN DESTITUTION



A Non-Governmental Organisation registered under the Indian Trusts Act, 1882.

Dedicated to destitute persons who trusted us with their life stories. Their voices are not footnotes but the heart of this work.

Dr. Justice B. R. Sarangi

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Dated: 1st June, 2026

MESSAGE

With great honour, I want to put my appreciation with regard to the publication of journal *"I Exist"* by the Koshish Trust, enumerating the lived experiences of people in destitution. It reveals that the trust in question is committed to address homelessness and destitution through collaborative engagement with state agencies and institutions and works in promoting dignity, justice and social inclusion for individual living in homelessness and institution.

The dedication and commitment of the Trust is praiseworthy and more specially, the members of the trust have worked extensively in custodial institution, which established under Beggary Law offering direct support, advocating for dignity and rights and intervening in innumerable individual cases.

The endeavor made by the trust to the extent that no human being should be punished for their poverty and that every individual is entitled to dignity, care and the equal protection of law, even though, laws have been framed by the legislatures, their implementation thereof, are being done by dedicated members of the trust so as to extend the benefits to each of the people who are in receiving end.

With all good wishes, the remarkable journey should give a fruitful result for the people living in society.

(Dr. Justice B.R. Sarangi)
Member/NHRC

COURAGE: A THANK YOU NOTE

Dear Friends,

As we present this report, I feel it is important to share a little bit about us and where we are as an organisation. I want to take this as an opportunity to express my gratitude for people who have been with us and enabled us to do what we do.

When I moved out of TISS where my formal engagement with homelessness and destitution began 20 years ago and attempted to set up an independent work. I knew this transition would be anything but uneventful. The core team that worked together for most of those 18 years decided to stay together in this transition as well.

We were cautiously excited and prepared for the challenges that would come our way. We knew it would be a huge task to build the work all over again but we were determined to not only rebuild but build it with additional value and covering those aspects of the destitution that we didn't cover earlier. Moving our intervention out of an institutional set up brought newer challenges and dynamics of the community but also opened up an opportunity to test ourselves with the core issues.

While we are a young organisation, technically speaking, the continuance of the core team means we continue being a group with long and crucial experience and understanding of the complex subject of destitution.

We thank everyone who believed in us and supported us as an organisation- our mentors, the friends of Sam-Haq, our brilliant Advisory Board Members, and our beautiful families who gave us the courage and confidence to take this path.

We can't thank enough our friends at Azim Premji Foundation for trusting and supporting us in a manner that is very rare. The way Foundation supported this new initiative is very special.

When we reflected on the broader aspects of our work, we realized that when it comes to destitution what we have is two kinds of narratives; one that is created by the state and society in general, and the other one is the social workers'/activists take. What is missing is people's narrative about their lives. People whose lives are discussed and debated with opinions formed and positions taken, ironically had no say in determining how their lives are being understood. As a tribute to their resilience and courage, we focussed on what they had to say about them and documented their side of the story. This report is a compilation and presentation of their lived experiences. This is our attempt to let the world know what a homeless and a destitute person thinks about what world thinks of him and her. I am confident that this report will be an important resource for social workers, students, state agencies, policymakers and anyone who genuinely attempts to understand the lives and emotions people in destitution experience.

Warm regards,



Mohd. Tarique

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SAM-HAQ TRUST: ABOUT US

Practising Systems Approach, Sam-Haq Trust is an organisation committed to address homelessness and destitution through collaborative engagement with state agencies and institutions. It works towards promoting dignity, justice, and social inclusion for individuals living in homelessness and destitution. With dedicated teams working in Mumbai and Delhi, the Trust works at the intersection of field intervention, policy engagement, and institutional reform.

Our work spans across a range of interconnected activities. We engage with those living on the streets, in shelters, and within custodial institutions. Our endeavour is to ensure that their basic rights are recognised and upheld. Our interventions extend from immediate relief and support to long-term social reintegration efforts, including reunification with families, access to mental and physical healthcare, and establishing connection to livelihoods. Through both preventive and curative approaches, we challenge the criminalisation of poverty and advocate for humane responses to the problem.

The strength of Sam-Haq Trust lies in the deep experience and long-standing commitment of its team. Though formally established as an organisation in 2024, the core team behind Sam-Haq Trust has been actively engaged on the subject of homelessness, destitution, and the criminalisation of poverty for nearly two decades. Over the years, members have worked extensively in custodial institutions established under beggary law, offering direct support, advocating for dignity and rights, and intervening in innumerable individual cases. In doing so, they have touched the lives of tens of thousands of individuals who have found themselves arrested under the beggary law merely because of their poverty or vulnerability.

The team has also played a critical role in examining the broader structures by conducting social audits of welfare institutions, identifying gaps and issues, and engaging with state agencies to initiate reform. The team's work is grounded in a rehabilitative approach that challenges punitive responses to poverty and, in its place, seeks to uphold the constitutional promise of justice and equality for all.

To bring long-term change, the organisation places policy advocacy and legal reform at the centre of its work with an approach that is grounded in lived realities and is informed by empirical evidence from continued field interventions. Sam-Haq Trust is driven by the conviction that no human being should be punished for their poverty, and that every individual is entitled to dignity, care, and the equal protection of the law.

BEGGING PREVENTION LEGISLATION

For an extended period in our history, India has been struggling with poverty and its many manifestations like homelessness, hunger, malnutrition, unemployment, and destitution. When poverty, coupled with a whirlpool of adverse circumstances, pushes individuals into destitution, and as a consequence, if they are compelled to live on street and beg, their presence is seen by law not through the lens of deprivation and human suffering but as a matter of public order. Under Schedule VII of the Constitution of India, public order is a state subject. Consequently, more than twenty states and union territories have laws to address begging. These laws, whose roots can be traced back to colonial times, claim to focus on the rehabilitation of persons in begging. Yet in both principle and practice, they treat such individuals as offenders, and punish not their actions, but their condition of existence. This remains one of the most disturbing aspects of beggary laws.

As a society, we are generally inclined to feel compassion for those who suffer, like people burdened by hardship, illness, or grief. When we see someone who is suffering, we often offer help in our capacity. But over time, something has changed. Many of us have come to ignore people engaged in begging. We now hardly see their suffering. This is not necessarily because we have stopped feeling sympathy or caring about people in need. This is because of how the law has spoken about begging and those who are engaged in it. These laws do more than just ban the act of begging; they change the way we see individuals in begging. They portray them as offenders; as people who fake their poverty, or are part of some racket. This position of the state has significant bearing on how an ordinary citizen understands, experiences and views a destitute person. Attaching the identities created by the state to a destitute person has consequences bigger than we might realise.

As soon as someone is marked as a criminal by the law, our way of seeing them changes. We stop seeing their problems and start seeing *them* as a problem. We become suspicious of their suffering. And with that, our sympathy disappears. So does our help. The law does not just punish people; it suggests society how to judge them.

Court judgements, civil society organisations and academic works have acknowledged that people beg only when they have no other means left to survive. Begging is not something people do by choice. It is something they do when all their options are closed. It is not a decision made freely, but one that is forced by deep poverty, exclusion, lack of employment, displacement, disability, illness or old age, and so on. If we must speak of 'choice,' then it is only a Hobson's choice, a situation where only one option is left, and it is not a real choice at all.

In such a situation, criminalisation of people for begging is worrying. Instead of looking at begging as a crime, we need to look at it as a sign of breakdowns within our social, economic, and institutional frameworks. It hints that our systems of care, protection and welfare are not reaching everyone. This is especially troubling in a country that runs some of the world's largest social welfare programmes. The failure, then, is not of the person who begs, but of the system that leaves them behind and with no other way to survive. Addressing begging through punitive approach is like treating the symptom while ignoring the disease.

In this context, beggary law becomes germane to a report about lived experiences of people who survive by begging. Because those experiences are not shaped only by poverty or illness or tragic events. They are also shaped by such people's interactions with the law and how society sees and treats them; and the way society treats them is deeply shaped by the discourse of the law. The law builds a picture of the person who begs as someone undeserving, even dangerous. That picture then enters the public mind, creating distance, mistrust, and rejection. Understanding these legal and social factors is necessary if we truly want to place the lives and struggles of people in begging in their full and proper context.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cities are full of possibilities and opportunities, yet countless people live with indignity, poverty, and poor conditions. The cities remain hostile to people in destitution. These people, who often remain invisible to most of us, are compelled to live a life where everyday survival is a challenge. Unfortunately, the projection or portrayal of the population is based on what others think about them with little connect to the reality and with what they may have to say.

When we come across the narrative on destitution, it is mostly shaped by two discourses. The first is that of the government and the public, which interprets destitution as an escape, a deliberate choice and even as a form of deception or fraud towards society. The second discourse is that of activists or the civil society groups seeing the destitute as victims. Even though this narrative advocates for the cause of destitute persons, it is still not 'their' version of their lives.

Recognising the necessity for people's narrative of their lives, this report is an attempt to see the life of destitution through the lens of those living it. This report is a documentation of the experiences of persons living in destitution, in their words and ways. Consciously, we did not analyse or interpret what was shared. Instead, we just presented whatever people expressed.

This work recognises that destitution and homelessness indicate towards symptoms of a deeper and continuing inequality. We spoke with over 500 individuals in 36 areas across Mumbai and Navi Mumbai on what their lives are like. We engaged on several critical aspects of their lives like the way begging is perceived, the meaning of cleanliness, the feeling of being unseen, their struggles, the paths that led them into destitution, their hopes for their children, and what they want society and the government to know about them.

Mumbai and Navi Mumbai, seen as centres of opportunity, are also places where many survive without shelter and without access to work, dignity, or care. This report listens to their lives through their everyday experiences. Its central premise is simple: those who beg or live on the streets are not problems to be managed. They are people with agency. They have voices. They exist.

The stories shared with us disrupt the comfortable myths that allow society to look away. We are told that begging is easy money, that it is chosen as a convenient escape from work, that those who beg are shirkers or befool us about their misery. The reality is far from this. Day after day, individuals face heat, rain, rejection, humiliation, and harassment. Their hands extend not out of preference or choice but because every other door has been slammed in their faces. Begging is not livelihood; it is the last, desperate effort for survival. And yet, society sticks to its myth of choice because it absolves us of responsibility and guilt. If destitution is simply a matter of laziness, then no structural change is required. But when we actually listen, we realise that destitution is not a failure of character, it is a mirror of several layers of failures on part of the society and the state.

The notion that begging is easy or money-generating takes a hit when one sees the actual struggle of people which also reflects on their bodies and faces. To sit on a pavement under the sun for long hours is not easy. To withstand humiliation, to be treated as invisible, to survive on what is handed down unpredictably is not wealth. Even on days when a person might gather more than expected, the costs of homelessness devour it immediately: food bought in small, expensive portions, water paid for in plastic bottles, public

toilets charging for every use, vulnerability to theft, and the endless need to rebuy belongings destroyed in municipality of state agencies' actions.

The reality is that life on the street is costly, both materially and emotionally. The person with no shelter spends more for each meal, for each bath, for each sip of water, than the person with a home. And beyond money, they pay in other currencies: dignity, safety, peace and mental health. If some stories of hidden wealth with someone who begs occasionally make it to the headlines, it is highly contextual and reported in a misrepresentational manner or with missing details. What is common is the opposite: lives lived in the exhausting negotiation between survival and rejection.

Few things expose the contradictions of our society as starkly as cleanliness. Cleanliness is celebrated as virtue. Our private spaces are polished, perfumed, and obsessively maintained. Yet the very act of keeping homes spotless often means pushing dirt outward onto streets, neighbourhoods, rivers, and onto the existence of those who must survive in these discarded spaces.

For the destitute, cleanliness is not a matter of virtue but of access. Public bathing costs money. Washing clothes is an expense. Soap is a luxury vulnerable to theft. For many, even their few belongings are confiscated during actions, leaving them literally stripped of the means to remain clean. And yet society interprets their unclean appearance as moral failure. We withdraw from the dirt on their clothes without recognising the structures that enforce that dirt. Some women even deliberately keep themselves unclean to guard themselves against sexual harassment, using filth as armour in a world where being neat can mean being targeted. Cleanliness, often celebrated as a symbol of dignity, becomes for the destitute an battle between safety, survival, and respect.

Among the most disturbing things we encountered was not hunger or disease, but the crushing weight of being unseen. People spoke again and again of the pain of invisibility, of being walked past without a glance, of being spoken to harshly, of being spat near, as though their existence itself was offensive. It is a peculiar kind of violence: not loud, not always physical, but devastating in its silence.

When rejection is repeated daily, it erodes the self like canker. Hurt becomes constant. Humiliation is internalised. And slowly, expectations die. People begin to say, "It matters no more," not because they are truly unaffected, but because hope is too burdensome to carry. Anger is rare, because anger presumes one still expects justice. What remains is numbness.

Emotional homelessness, the feeling of being without belonging, without recognition, is perhaps as suffocating as physical homelessness. A person can be fed and clothed yet feel unwanted. To live in such condition is to carry wounds invisible to the eye but deeply hurting the soul.

When asked about their children, people spoke of education as the most common dream, not simply as schooling, but as a path to dignity, a chance to break free from inherited suffering. Others longed for their children to have stable homes, secure work, and loving families. These were modest dreams, rooted not in fantasies of wealth but in the desire for ordinary human life.

And yet, many also confessed to having no expectations. For some, this was because their children had already turned away from them. For others, it was a way of protecting themselves from the pain of shattered hopes. Still, the very fact that most individuals continue to dream shows the resilience of human hope. Even in lives ruined by rejection, the imagination of a better future for their children exists.

The common perception about those who beg is shaped by stereotypes. They are seen as lazy, cunning, or addicted. These false images allow society to disown responsibility. Then, laws such as the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959, criminalise poverty itself. Police actions, municipal raids, confiscation of belongings are not random incidents but recurring features of how state institutions engage with the poor. Instead of care, there is punishment. Instead of inclusion, exclusion.

This report carries numbers, because numbers help reveal scale. But what it truly carries are voices that tell us of pain, of resilience, of resignation, and of small, yet strong hopes. When asked what they wanted society and government to know, many simply said: See us. Respect us. Treat us as humans. Others said: If you cannot help, at least do not harm. These are not huge demands. They are modest reminders that dignity is a right of every human being.

For our team, listening was itself a transformative act. Many participants cried as no one had ever asked them about their lives, that even sitting beside them to listen felt like an extraordinary act of recognition. This was humbling but also unsettling. It forced us to confront how rarely the destitute are allowed to speak on their own terms.

At the centre of this report is an appeal: to rethink how we see, how we judge, and how we respond. Those who beg are not asking for pity. They are asking for recognition, for inclusion, for equal treatment. They are asking for a society where education, healthcare, and shelter are not luxuries, but rights. They are asking for a state that does not punish them for being poor but protects them in their vulnerability.

Our response to destitution requires a shift in both policy and attitude. It means moving from criminalisation to care, from suspicion to solidarity. It means recognising that dignity is as essential as food or shelter. It means questioning our own comfort with inequality and asking ourselves if we can share even when it costs us something, if we can extend not just spare change but that which is not in surplus.

“I Exist” is not just the title of this report. It is the message carried by those whose lives are narrated here. It is their reminder that they are present, even when they are ignored. Destitution is not an individual failing. It is produced by structures of abandonment, neglect, and inequality. And until we confront and dismantle these structures, until we choose to see those who have been rendered invisible, we remain complicit in their suffering. To say “I exist” is to assert to the world that behind each fragile body on the street lies a person with history, loss, hope, and endurance. To listen to that declaration is to recognise our shared responsibility. And to respond to it with justice, with care, with solidarity is the only way forward if we are to call ourselves a humane society.

The voices in this report also remind us that meaningful change requires more than momentary attention or isolated measures. Destitution continues because the structures around us exist in ways that make certain people continually disposable. Any long-term response must therefore critically assess the assumptions that govern policy, public perception, and the systems.

The narratives show clearly that people do not seek grand reforms; they seek fairness, stability, and the ability to live without fear. This means addressing systemic gaps in shelter, healthcare, labour protections, social security, and accessibility to basic services. It also means acknowledging the limitations of charity. Acts of kindness may ease immediate pain, but they do not correct institutional problems. What is needed is a shift in the infrastructure of care and protection so that no person must depend on chance, goodwill, or public sympathy to survive.

This report is, therefore, a reminder that the responsibility of recognition does not rest only with the state. It rests with society, with communities, and with each one of us. Change begins when we refuse to reduce individuals to stereotypes, when we recognise that every person seen on the pavement is part of the same Indian community as ourselves.

INTRODUCTION

Three-quarters of a century have passed since the people of India gave themselves a Constitution, a promise to uphold liberty, equality, and fraternity. The Indian state and society have since been striving to achieve these ideals. And yet, these ideals continue to elude full achievement. We do not reject these ideals; we cherish them, even attempt to fight for them. But too often, we falter. We falter because the magnitude of the problem is immense, and we also falter because we are often so deeply immersed in our own pre-occupations that we miss to notice certain issues altogether.

By the force of our conditioning, we often end up judging those who do not fit within the mould of what we have come to regard as 'normal.' We label them deviant, immoral, and responsible for their own suffering. And with that judgement, we withhold our respect, our compassion. This discrimination is not always conscious or deliberate. It is insidious, embedded within the very fabric of our social conditioning, sustained by norms that we rarely pause to question.

Poverty remains one of India's most deep-rooted, intractable and persistent problems, which has so far evaded a long-term solution despite decades of economic growth. The Union Government, in sync with state governments, has been running a wide range of social welfare programmes to tackle the tenacious problems of poverty as well as several kinds of social exclusions. It has laws on inclusive education, policies for inclusive healthcare, acts for food security, and livelihood security. And yet, it is perplexing to see the existence of a legal instrument that criminalises begging, the most extreme and disturbing form of poverty. Begging prevention laws exist in more than twenty states and union territories of India which criminalise the act of begging. The Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959, upon which most of these acts are modelled, has provisions for detention of a person which ranges from one year to three years on first conviction. On subsequent convictions, this period keeps increasing and goes up to lifetime under certain conditions.

Despite earnest efforts to address the issue, steady progress has been hindered by the sheer scale of the problem, mounting population pressure, persistent agrarian distress, shortcomings in policy implementation, and, at times, the influence of electoral dynamics.

We need to think, and perhaps overthink, the troubling fact that despite the honest efforts of civil society and successive governments, people continue to be sent to Beggars' Homes. These institutions, although intended for rehabilitation, operate on principles bearing uncanny similarity to those of prisons.

We have been taught, by family, by society, by history itself, to believe in a particular version of normality. Those who conform to it are treated with dignity; those who do not are pushed to the margins. This is why we unconsciously avert our eyes when we pass a person who is homeless, why we recoil at the sight of a drug-dependent person, why we instinctively distance ourselves from those whose existence unsettles our notions of order. Without reflection, we carry forward this inherited prejudice, convinced that the fault lies not also in our perceptions but only in such people themselves. And so, we rarely

look inward, rarely interrogate the deep-seated biases that make us complicit in the very inequality we claim to oppose.

Among the most disowned in the hierarchy of exclusion are those who survive through begging. They do not simply exist in physical poverty; they are deprived of dignity, dismissed as nuisances, as burdens, as symbols of failure rather than individuals shaped by circumstance. Cities, with their ceaseless movement and towering ambitions, are indifferent to their presence. They live among us but remain unseen, reduced to ghostly figures in the periphery of our consciousness. The stories we tell ourselves about them are convenient untruths: that begging is a choice, that it is an easy way to earn a living, that those who engage in it do so willingly, even contentedly. These narratives serve only to relieve us of responsibility, to allow us to walk past them without guilt, without the discomfort of acknowledging their suffering. In reducing them to stereotypes, we erase their humanity, dehumanise them.

Somewhere or the other, all of us have passed by a person sitting on the street corner, holding out a hand, begging for a little help. Their tired eyes, worn-out clothes, and rough hands might break our hearts, but more often than not, we avert our gaze. We might feel sympathy, a brief moment of guilt, but we keep walking. Why? Because we are in a rush, perhaps trying to catch the 9:08 train, perhaps running late for an important meeting, or simply drowning under the burden of daily tasks and deadlines. The world around us is demanding, and our minds are consumed with the pressing weight of our own worries: our work, our commitments, our lives. We ignore them not because we do not care, but because we are caught in a cycle of our own concerns. It is not an active rejection, but a passive one. The truth is, we turn a blind eye, even if only for a fleeting moment, because we are caught up in our own struggles. But this act of ignoring, even if unintentional, has consequences. It chips away at that person's sense of self-worth and dignity, leaving them feeling small and invisible. Each moment they are overlooked, they carry a quiet, often painful, hurt, as if they are lesser beings and not humans.

But two things need to be mentioned in this context. First, begging itself is an extremely strenuous and often humiliating activity, yet we are led to believe otherwise, largely because it is an economic activity that does not visibly contribute to the formal economy. This perception arises not from the lived reality of hardship, but from an economic system that values productivity and measurable output above human endurance or survival. Second, beggary is viewed as a threat not merely because of its visibility, but because it unsettles established power structures and disrupts the smooth functioning of capitalism. Yet we are encouraged to see it not as a structural consequence but as a moral failing, a personal vice. Although social norms are shaped by complex cultural and political processes, dominant discourse often presents them as neutral, natural, and desirable making it all the more difficult to question their legitimacy.

Society often defines what is 'normal' and implicitly expects everyone to conform to that standard. Those who do not conform to it, whether because of their economic condition, lifestyle, or choices, are seen as outsiders or deviants. But normality is not an objective or timeless truth. It is a construct shaped and transmitted through generations by cultural narratives, media representations, and institutional influences, including those of religion and education. In essence, the idea of what is acceptable or unacceptable is

shaped by our social and power structures. Those who conform to prevailing norms gain social legitimacy while those who deviate from it, often face exclusion or stigmatisation. This is particularly evident in the way society treats people who are homeless and are forced to beg for survival. They are not simply seen as individuals in need of help and care; they are treated as disruptions to public order, as reminders of economic and social failures that the world would rather ignore.

This report seeks to confront these deeply entrenched misconceptions by shifting the lens, by allowing those who endure the difficulties of homelessness and destitution to tell their own stories. It is an attempt to make visible those who are invisible, to give voice to the silenced, to force ourselves to factor in realities we prefer to ignore. Through their words, this report explores not only the pain and hardship of their daily existence but also their fears, their hopes, their quiet, unspoken despair.

For nearly two decades, members of Sam-Haq Trust have worked closely with individuals facing homelessness and extreme marginalisation. And in all those years, one truth has remained evident: the prejudices against the homeless and the destitute are baseless, born not of reason but of unawareness. These biases are the product of a belief that any way of living that deviates from our own is basically wrong. We have internalised the fiction that suffering is self-inflicted, that poverty is a result of personal failure and laziness rather than systemic flaw, that those who struggle deserve their fate. In doing so, we refuse to acknowledge the inherent fragility of human existence, the brutal randomness of history, the political unwillingness to uplift the falling lot, the crushing weight of economic structures that reduce individuals to mere cogs in a merciless machine.

Having worked in the field for such a long time, our team came to a sad realisation: despite the urgency of the issue, despite the huge effort required to address it, and despite the deeply entrenched false images of the homeless and those who beg, there exists a stark absence of rigorous reporting and publications that centre the voices and lived experiences of these individuals. The narratives of people in begging remain largely unheard, their realities buried under heaps of misconception and indifference.

We saw, time and again, how society's perception of persons in beggary is shaped by caricatures: of fraudsters pretending to be struck by misery, of laziness mistaken for helplessness, of criminal networks and gangs carrying out the act. These convenient untruths obscure the real forces at play: chronic poverty, disability, mental illness, natural calamities, caste-based exclusions, and a social order that routinely denies opportunities to the most vulnerable. The lived experience of begging is far from the simplistic images we carry in our minds, but hardly any efforts have been made to document this reality with the depth and dignity it deserves.

So, we set out to do our bit. We decided to capture the personal narratives of 500 individuals who depend on begging for survival. From the standpoint of analysis and writing, this number is vast. Each story is rich with its own complexities, each person brings forth a different sort of suffering, resilience, and hope. And yet, when measured against the scale of homelessness and destitution in our cities, 500 is but a drop in the ocean. The magnitude of the problem is overwhelming, and our resources like our small team, our limited time, our stretched capacity, felt painfully inadequate. Still, we pressed on, determined to at least chip away at the myths that have engulfed an entire population.

With this report, we aim not only to present the raw, unfiltered realities of those who beg but also to address the systems that marginalise them further. We hope to engage institutions, policymakers, and government bodies in serious, evidence-based discussions that lead to a more humane, inclusive approach. Beyond that, we want to reshape public consciousness: to replace judgement with empathy, misinformation with truth, and apathy with action. In short, we aim to contribute to a more nuanced and evolved public understanding of the issue that can bring social change of one degree or another. If our work can dismantle even a fraction of the prejudice surrounding begging, if it can contribute in some way to a shift in policies or public attitudes, then we will be glad to have taken an important step towards a more just and compassionate society.

This report, then, is not an academic exercise. It is an act of bearing witness. It exists to dismantle the illusions we have built around homelessness and begging, to expose the cruelty of our indifference, to remind us that behind every statistic is a human being who is wounded, weary, and waiting acknowledgement from a world that refuses to see them. *I Exist* is, at its core, a demand for recognition, for dignity, for justice.

PORTRAITS OF LIFE IN DESTITUTION

Before moving further into the details of our process and findings, we felt it important to pause and bring the reader closer to the people whose lives form the base of this report. The narratives in this section are placed here so that the lived realities of individuals in destitution remain at the centre of the reader's understanding from the very beginning. These portraits offer a glimpse into the everyday struggles, hopes, and resilience of those who shared their lives with us. They also prepare the ground for the chapters that follow, helping the reader to view the numbers, themes, and evidence in the light of actual lives and experiences.

The individuals whose experiences are shared here come from diverse backgrounds but share common threads of displacement, marginalisation, and endurance. These narratives reflect not just their personal challenges but also the broader structural forces that shape their lives. In sharing these stories, we aim to honour their voices, acknowledging that each life is more than just a statistic.

By foregrounding human stories, this chapter serves to contextualise the numbers offering nuanced insights into the everyday struggles and quiet resistances of those who spend their days and nights on streets. These stories are not merely accounts of hardship; they are testaments to human spirit and the will to survive.

As you read these case studies, consider them not just as isolated experiences but as reflective of larger social conditions that necessitate critical attention and action. Through these narratives, we hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of homelessness, urging readers to see beyond the numbers.

Janakitai: A Conversation That Changed a Life

Age: 50 years

Mumbai, a city that never sleeps, is always alive with energy, lights, and an unending flow of people. Among the many places that define the city's spirit, Dadar railway station stands as a hub of constant movement. Tens of thousands of people pass through its platforms every day while heading to work, shopping, or navigating their daily lives. In the midst of this constant chaos, one woman, Janakitai, sat alone on the footpath near an Udipi hotel, unnoticed by the world around her.

The first time I saw her, something stirred within me. There she was, sitting quietly, lost in her own world, while the rest of Mumbai rushed past her without a second glance. Without hesitation, I sat beside her. The moment I did, I felt the weight of a thousand eyes upon me. People who had ignored her existence for months, maybe years, were now curiously glancing in my direction. It seemed as though my presence had suddenly made her visible to them.

I could not help but reflect on how society perceives individuals. A person wearing neat and clean clothes sitting on the pavement would attract attention, but someone who looked unkempt and disoriented was rendered invisible. Janakitai had been sitting there for so long, yet possibly no one had asked about her well-being.

When I tried speaking to her, she barely responded. It was evident she had not bathed in months. The weariness in her eyes spoke of struggles unknown. I simply asked if she had eaten, and she shook her head. Without a second thought, I bought her some food and water. As I handed it to her, she surprised me by saying, “तू पण खा!”¹ Her words touched me deeply. Even in her dire condition, she thought of others first.

Thus began our conversation, and as we talked, she shared a little about herself. She told me that her name was Janaki and that she was originally from Latur. When I asked if she wanted to go home, she nodded, but it was evident that she was lost in a world where she could not find her way back. It was clear she needed help.

I called the emergency police helpline (112) to seek assistance, but no help came. Days later, on January 14, 2025, I found myself at Dadar station again for a meeting nearby. I thought of her, and with the intention to meet her, I returned to the spot where I had last met her. But she was not there. Dadar is an expansive station, known not merely for its scale but also for the vast number of people that pass through it each day, turning its platforms into spaces of chaos and life. Searching for someone in the midst of all this crowd is a daunting task, demanding both time and patience. As the time of my meeting was drawing near, I left for the meeting venue with the intention of searching Janakital after the meeting. Therefore, after attending my meeting, I went back to search for her. After looking around for quite some time, I finally found her on one of the staircases of the station.

This time, I sought help from the railway police. After I explained her situation to them, they agreed to assist. With their help, she was transferred to Grace Foundation in Mahul for shelter and medical treatment. We have had a longstanding relationship with Grace Foundation, having collaborated with them on several cases over the last twenty years. Knowing that she was now in safe hands, I returned home.

A few days later, I visited Janakital at Grace Foundation. To my delight, she recognised me. It was heartwarming to see the transformation in her. She looked better, more stable. I later learned that she belonged to a well-to-do family but had ended up on the streets due to mental health issues.

With further assistance from Grace Foundation, Janakital was transferred to Shraddha Rehabilitation Centre in Karjat, a facility specialising in the care of mentally ill patients. As she needed mental health care and wanted to go home, Shraddha was a more appropriate organisation because of its focus on both these aspects. We have collaborated with Shraddha as well for many years.

I kept in touch with the social workers at Shraddha, who informed me that Janakital’s family had been traced. Meanwhile, her treatment continued, bringing significant improvement to her condition. After a thorough process, Janakital was eventually reunited with her family.

I later visited her home in Kandivali, where Janakital, her husband, and their daughter welcomed me warmly. The joy on her face was indescribable. She was happy, safe, and

¹ You also eat.

receiving the medical care she needed. Her family members told me that Janakitai had been missing from home for almost two years. They had been desperately searching for her, unaware of where she had ended up. Her disappearance had taken a heavy toll on her loved ones, and they had almost lost hope. And now, thanks to our combined efforts, she was back where she belonged.

This experience left me with a deep realisation that so many people are lost in the chaos of our cities, unseen and unheard. Sometimes, all it takes is one conversation, one moment of kindness, to change someone's life. Janakitai's story is a reminder that we must always look beyond the surface and truly see the people around us.

The case of Janakitai highlights not only the personal struggle of an individual but also the broader, often neglected issue of mental health care in India. As a country, we are in the midst of an ongoing, yet slow, battle to change the way mental health is perceived and addressed. Mental health issues remain shrouded in stigma, and the available infrastructure is far from adequate to address the needs of those who suffer in silence.

India's mental health system is underfunded and overburdened, often limited to urban centres and, even then, providing treatment that can often be inadequate. For many, the concept of mental illness is not fully understood, and its treatment is viewed through a lens of social exclusion, rather than compassion and care. Those living with mental health issues often find themselves on the streets, like Janakitai, facing the compounded struggle of survival, societal neglect, and a lack of proper medical attention.

Janaki's story brings to light a common reality faced by innumerable people in need: while many individuals are genuinely concerned to help, their ability to offer meaningful support is often limited by societal norms, personal fears, or simple ignorance. The most common response to those in similar situations as Janaki, especially on the streets, is financial aid. While well-intentioned, money does not address the root causes of suffering. In fact, it can sometimes be a way for individuals to disburden their conscience without confronting the deeper issues at play. People are often willing to give money, but they hesitate to offer more meaningful help, such as providing emotional support, understanding, or help to access professional care.

This hesitation stems from a broader issue. Our reluctance to engage with those who are perceived as 'different' or 'other.' Well-meaning citizens may not know where to start or how to approach someone like Janaki. The ease of handing over a few notes might seem like a simple, manageable solution, but it does not lead to lasting change.

Furthermore, the fast-paced, routine-centric nature of urban life only compounds the problem. People are caught up in their daily responsibilities, from work to family to their own personal struggles. The demands of city living, especially in large metropolises like Mumbai, often create a distance between people. This disconnection leads to apathy, where seeing someone in need is merely an inconvenience to be avoided, rather than a call for action.

Yet, Janakitai's story demonstrates how a small act of compassion, a moment of conversation, an offer of food, can shift the course of someone's life. Helping someone in need

does not always require the means of huge resources; sometimes, it can simply be willingness to see the person behind the suffering.



Mohini: A Life Between Rejection and Survival

Age: 27 years

When a child is born, their family dreams of a bright future for them. The child, too, grows up weaving dreams of happiness, love, and success. But for those labelled as transgender (*hijra*), these dreams are shattered before they can even take flight. Every right is stolen from them: the right to love, to dignity, to simply exist without shame. Even their own parents, who once held them close, are forced by society to treat them as if they never existed. A child, alive and breathing, is mourned as if dead. Same is the story of Mohini who is twenty-seven years old. Ideally, Mohini should have been working in an office, sipping coffee during tea breaks, chatting with colleagues, and making plans for the future. She should have been going home in the evening to a family that welcomed her with love.

But Mohini begs.

Walking from car to car at traffic signals, Mohini hides her pain beneath layers of makeup, covering wounds that the world refuses to see. With a forced smile, her hands clapping, not in joy, but in silent desperation. In exchange for a few coins, five, maybe ten, she offers blessings from a heart that experiences only rejection. Every insult, every cruel glance, every car window rolled up in disgust... she swallows it all, carrying the unbearable weight of a world that denies her dignity, yet demands her resilience. Clapping her hands, pleading for a few rupees, not for greed, neither for luxury, but for survival.

She was not always here, wandering the streets. She had a home once, a family, a place where she belonged. But the world did not allow her to stay. From a young age, she knew she was different. She did not fit into the role society assigned her at birth. And for that, she was punished. Her own people turned against her, whispering behind her back, looking at her with disgust. The village that should have been her safe haven became a place of shame. So, she left. Not because she wanted to, but because she had no choice. "I had to leave," she says. "Not because I wanted to abandon my family, but because my presence made their lives unbearable. I became their shame."

But the world outside has no kindness to spare. People like her are told that they belong on the streets, that begging is their fate, carved into their being like a curse. Get a job, they say, but when she asks, the doors not just stay closed, they are slammed in her face. What work can we give you? they sneer. We have daughters here, we have men here! You'll make them uncomfortable. As if she is something shameful. As if her very presence is a stain they cannot bear. As if she was never meant to belong anywhere at all.

And so, Mohini roams the bustling streets of Mumbai, pausing at traffic signals, her weary hands outstretched, hoping, just hoping, that someone will spare a five-rupee coin. On good days, she manages to get ₹300, on bad days, far less. Sometimes, almost nothing!

Some kind souls give without hesitation, but many others shrink away, their faces twisting in disgust. They roll up their windows, shutting her out as if she were invisible, as if she did not exist. Some mock her, their laughter sharp and cruel. Some hurl insults, their words cutting deeper than hunger ever could. They call her filthy. Disgusting. Unworthy. And yet, she keeps walking. Because she has no choice.

Yet, at night, the same society that mocks her during the day seeks her out in the shadows. The men who refuse to meet her eyes at a traffic signal come looking for her when the streets are empty. The hypocrisy burns. “We keep ourselves clean,” she says, “yet people still call us dirty. They say we do that kind of work. But when they stop giving us alms, what else are we supposed to do. And even then, it is the same men who call us filthy during the day who come to us at night.”

She says, I have tried, so many times, to end my life. “Sometimes, I wonder why I even exist.” The weight of humiliation, of rejection, of being treated as less than human crushes me. Some days, I can’t bring myself to beg; I can’t stand the stares, the whispers, the way people look at me like I don’t exist, or worse, like I shouldn’t. On those days, I lock myself away in my tiny, rented room, staring at the ceiling, drowning in silence, feeling myself disappear bit by bit,” she says.

She has lost count of how many times she has stood at a traffic signal and thought, ‘what if I come under these vehicles and died.’

People see her only when she asks for money. They do not see the pain hidden behind layers of makeup, the wounds behind the forced smiles. They do not see the little child who once dreamed of being accepted, who wanted to live with dignity, who wanted to love and be loved.

Still she dreams. She dreams of walking freely, of living without fear, of having a real job, a real home. She dreams of visiting her mother, not like a thief sneaking in at night, but as a daughter, openly, proudly.

But she knows that this dream may never come true.

Mohini’s life exposes the many failures of our society: its welfare structures, healthcare system, and the deeply entrenched social, political, and economic realities that have shaped her existence. A truly inclusive welfare system would have ensured that a person like her, abandoned by her family and ostracised by society, did not have to resort to begging for survival. But no support arrived when she was forced to leave home. No aid came when she struggled for an education, for a job, for dignity. No financial assistance, no food security, no legal protection. If the state truly functioned equally for all, Mohini would not be standing at traffic signals, extending her hand to strangers, begging not just for money, but for recognition as a human being. Even seeking employment is an impossible battle. She is told to ‘get a job,’ but where? Who will hire her? Employers refuse to give her work, fearing the presence of a transgender woman in their offices, their shops, their homes. They say, ‘We have daughters here, we have men here. You don’t belong here. Even government schemes that claim to empower the marginalised rarely reach people like her. The system’s failure is evident in the fact that Mohini, despite her desire to work and live with dignity, has no alternative but to beg.

Mohini's life is an example of stolen possibilities. She did not choose this fate; it was imposed on her by a world that refuses to accept her. Transgender individuals in India are legally recognised, yet their rights exist only on paper. Welfare schemes rarely reach them, education is denied to them, workplaces exclude them, and even the most basic human interactions are filled with rejection. And then there is the law, the anti-begging laws that criminalise her very existence. The state sees her as a problem to be removed from public spaces rather than a person in need of support. There are no state-supported alternatives for people like her. No practical rehabilitation, no systemic efforts to provide education, employment, or protection from violence. Political discourse rarely acknowledges people like Mohini; she is not part of any powerful voting bloc. The concerns of transgender individuals remain an afterthought, overlooked in the pursuit of more politically convenient agendas. Her life is not just a personal tragedy, it is an indictment of our institutions, our systems, and our collective conscience. A society free from discrimination, a healthcare system that does not deny treatment, a political structure that actively uplifts the most marginalised, and an economy that creates opportunities for all could have transformed her life. But instead, she stands at traffic signals and railway stations, ignored, ridiculed, and dehumanised.

The system has no place for her. Welfare schemes, education, and employment, none of them include people like her. Even survival is a battle. There are no protections, no safety nets. The police harass her. Society shuns her. The only thing she has is the street, the traffic signal, the railway stations, the crowds she disappears into every day. Her tragedy forces us to confront difficult questions: What does it mean to be part of a society that systematically excludes an entire group of people? How do dominant narratives sustain oppression?

Mohini's life is a mirror held up to society, reflecting its cruelty, its hypocrisy, its failure to protect the most vulnerable. She exists in a world that does not want her yet refuses to let her go. She is not asking for much. Just the right to live. To be seen, to be treated as human.



Shama: Dharmecha Arthecha Kamecha Imam Nāticharāmi

Age: 35 years

In some cultures, girls grow up often nurturing profound dreams about marriage, deeply influenced by societal traditions, folklore, films, and familial conversations. Among these dreams, one central vision is the idea of a life partner resembling a prince who is handsome, sensitive, and affectionate; someone who would shield them from every sorrow and fill their lives with happiness. The idea of marriage is often envisioned as something akin to a fairy tale.

From a young age, many girls cherish the image of a shy yet proud bride, adorned with intricate henna on her hands and feet, dressed in a vibrant red attire. Marriage is perceived as the beginning of a new life, where a girl enters a new home, embraces a new identity, and takes on a new role. There is also the dream that the in-laws' home would be

a place where she would be accepted as a daughter, receiving affection, understanding, and respect.

Girls often aspire for a marital life filled with love and mutual understanding, wishing for a spouse who would not only be their dream companion but also a true friend who respects their thoughts and desires. The dream of motherhood and establishing a family is also an intrinsic part of these aspirations. In some cultures, marriage is regarded as a symbol of a woman's social completeness, reinforcing the sentiment that marriage is the most significant milestone in life.

These dreams carry a certain emotional sweetness, yet oftentimes they shatter like glass upon colliding with the harsh reality. Nevertheless, the cultural roots of these dreams are so deep that they continue to thrive in the hearts of girls across generations.

Shama, who grew up in a small village in western Uttar Pradesh, entered the bond of marriage, carrying with her countless dreams. The first two months after marriage were pleasant and happy. Then one day, her husband suggested moving to Mumbai, saying that he would earn there, and they would lead a good life together there. For Shama, this proposal felt like a gateway to a new horizon: a dazzling metropolis, a brighter future, and the possibility of realising the dreams she had cherished for years.

Mumbai! The very mention of this city creates a dazzling image: towering skyscrapers, wide streets bathed in light with luxury cars racing past, fast-paced lives, and a soaring energy. It is the city that never sleeps.

Yet beneath this glitter lies another city, one that often remains hidden from our sight. Right in the heart of this metropolis, in the shadows of these towering buildings and along the edges of these broad roads, live people for whom every day is a struggle: a struggle to survive, to secure a meal, to find safety, and to simply stay alive. They have no roof over their heads, no access to clean water, no proper medical care, and no place of dignity. Though they live among us, they remain invisible, like phantoms; neither recognised by society nor considered in state policies.

This contradiction is not merely geographical; it is moral and human as well. On one side, there are air-conditioned lives in high-rise buildings; on the other, people forced to spend rainy nights on the pavement, soaked and shivering. One side glitters with deluxe restaurants, while the other sees children scavenging for food in waste bins. This city is divided into two worlds, one is visible, the other is invisible.

It is this second, hidden world of Mumbai that reveals much about our social fabric and our increasingly desensitised conscience. It also raises an important question: Is a city defined solely by its buildings, businesses, and dazzling lights, or does it also include the people who shape, build, and maintain it?

But Shama was unaware of this harsh reality of the city. She did not know that her journey would lead her down a path where hopes would gradually fade, and dreams would die before they could bloom. Life in Mumbai turned out to be nothing like she had imagined. Upon arriving in Mumbai, Shama and her husband, let us call him Hashim, rented a small house and began their life in this vast city.

A little way down the line, Shama became pregnant. And when she was in the final days of her pregnancy, one morning as she woke up, she realised that her world had turned turtle. In the stillness of the night, Hashim had left, apparently for good and all.

Hashim left his wife and yet unborn child in the dead of night, not in the spirit of Siddhārtha Gautama's Mahabhinishkramana,² that silent and noble renunciation in pursuit of truth and liberation for all beings, but in a manner more akin to Ajamila,³ drawn not by a higher calling but by the pull of the body, desire, and delusion. His departure was not a transcendence, but a descent and a fall into the shadows, into the darkness, not towards the light.⁴

Haji Ali Dargah is a renowned Sufi shrine located in Mumbai. Situated approximately 500 metres into the Arabian Sea from the Worli coast in South Mumbai, this dargah rests on a small islet, connected to the city by a narrow causeway. During high tide, the islet is partially submerged, making the dargah appear as if it is floating on the sea.

People from diverse religions, classes, and communities visit this shrine seeking blessings, peace, and refuge, while a significant number of tourists also come to witness its beauty. The dargah stands as a symbol of cultural harmony and spiritual unity, where faith, like the waves of the sea, seems to transcend social boundaries.

Dedicated to the 15th-century saint Haji Ali Shah Bukhari, this sacred site is a remarkable embodiment of Mumbai's multi-religious spirit and its vibrant cultural diversity.

² Mahabhinishkramana (महाभिनिक्रमण) is a significant event in the life of Siddhārtha Gautama, who later became the Buddha. It refers to the "Great Renunciation," where Siddhartha, at the age of 29, left his royal life, wife Yaśodharā, and son Rāhula to seek spiritual awakening and liberation from the cycle of birth and death (Saṃsāra). This departure marked the beginning of his journey towards enlightenment, driven by a profound realisation of human suffering and the quest for a path beyond worldly attachments.

³ Ajamila is a figure from the Bhagavata Purana, a key text in the Hindu Puranic tradition. He was born into a virtuous Brahmin household and was initially devoted to spiritual practice, ritual duties, and a life of moral discipline. However, his life took a decisive turn when he once came upon a *dāsī* (servant woman or courtesan, but in some texts, interpreted as a prostitute) engaged in an intimate act with a man of questionable conduct. The sight awakened in him an overpowering desire, and from that moment, Ajamila began to abandon his earlier life and fell into disgrace. He left his wife and children, forsook his priestly responsibilities, and began living with the woman. Over time, he fathered several children with her and sank deeper into a life marked by indulgence, moral neglect and crime.

Ajamila's story is often cited in Hindu philosophical discourse as an archetype of moral collapse, of how even the learned and virtuous can be undone by unguarded desire. For those interested in the full account, including his eventual redemption, the story can be found in the Bhagavata Purana, Canto 6, particularly in Chapters 1 through 3.

⁴ This narrative is told entirely from Shama's point of view. It is shaped not just by what she remembers, but also by how she has felt, seen, and made sense of things over the past nine years. Her account does not offer a neutral or complete picture of the past, but rather, a version of events as they survive in her mind. We were not able to speak with her husband, so his side of the story remains unknown. What we present here, then, is not the whole truth, but one person's way of telling it. This is not a shortcoming, but a reminder that every story is shaped by the person who tells it: by their experiences, their position in the world, and the inner world they carry within their self. At the same time, Shama's narrative carries its own truth and significance. It reveals how she has lived and made sense of her circumstances, and how she negotiated with her reality, and in doing so, it offers valuable insight into the emotional and social realities that facts alone may not fully capture.

Along this causeway, many people sat in a line, looking at the tourists and visitors with hopeful eyes, seeking some financial help. Among them was Shama, whose face shown a smile and a sense of contentment, a rare calm that even years of spiritual practice often fails to bring.

I gently asked her permission to talk, introducing myself explaining my purpose, and the work of my organisation. She agreed to converse.

Shama slowly began to speak her history, in a rhythm born out of years of sorrow and an acceptance of fate. She said, “मैं नौ सालों से यहां बैठ रही हूं। आज मुझे यहां बैठने में शर्म-लज्जा नहीं आती है, आज मैं इस जीवन को स्वीकार कर चुकी हूं।”⁵ We know that, as time passes, our lives slowly flow into unspoken compromises, an acceptance arising not out of choice, but out of sheer necessity. Shama continued, “जब मैं पहली बार यहां बैठी थी, उस दिन के जज्बात बयान करना मेरे लिए बहुत मुश्किल है। और इन नौ सालों में आप पहली ऐसी व्यक्ति हैं जो मेरे पास बैठ कर मुझसे बात कर रहीं हैं।”⁶

Shama’s voice carried the weight of a lifetime of misery; a history where the liveliness of dreams gradually fades into silence. She said, “मैं अपनी शादी के दो महीने बाद पति के साथ मुंबई आई, हम लोग भाड़े के घर पर रह रहे थे। मैं प्रेग्नेंसी के आखरी समय में थी जब मेरे पति बिन बताए गायब हो गए। उन्हें बहुत दूँदा पर उनका कोई पता नहीं चला। घर में कुछ खाने को नहीं था। मकान मालकिन भी किराया मांग रही थी।”⁷ She continued, “मैं पति को ढूँढ़ रही थी, साथ ही काम भी। मैं पढ़ी लिखी नहीं हूँ जो मुझे ऑफिस में काम मिलता। मेहनत का काम करने की मेरी हालत नहीं थी। बहुत कोशिश की काम ढूँढ़ने की, पर मुझे किसी ने काम नहीं दिया। बोले आपकी हालत ऐसी नहीं है कि आप काम कर सकें।”⁸

Then Shama spoke of that heartbreaking moment, “फिर किसी ने मुझे बताया: ‘हाजी अली जा, वहां बाबा तेरी मुराद पूरी करेंगे।’ प्रेग्नेंसी का मेरा आखरी समय था जबसे मैं यहां हूँ। यहीं मुझे एक बेटी हुई। उसकी पांच साल की उम्र तक वो भी मेरे साथ यहीं रही। मुझे दिन रात उसके भविष्य की ही चिंता रहती थी। और उसकी सुरक्षा की चिंता। मैं उसे अपने जैसा जीवन नहीं देना चाहती हूँ, इसलिए मैंने उसे मदरसे में दाखिल कर दिया। अभी वो वहीं रह कर पढ़ाई करती है। मैं उसे पढ़ा-लिखा कर अपने पैरों पर खड़ा कराना चाहती हूँ ताकि वो किसी की मोहताज न बने। यहां से जो भिक्षा मिलती है उसे अपनी बेटी के लिए जमा कर रही हूँ ताकि उसकी पढ़ाई में कोई रुकावट न आए।”⁹

Shama shared that after 9 p.m., when the dargah closes, she sleeps on the main road. She also mentioned that she has never been able to sleep peacefully, constantly fearing theft of her belongings, money, or the risk of abuse. She said, “आज मैं अपने जीवन से समझौता कर चुकी हूँ। कुछ साल पहले पति की खबर मिली। पता चला कि वो दूसरी औरत के साथ भाग गया था। उससे उसकी कोई औलाद नहीं हुई। जब परेशान हुआ है

⁵ I have been sitting here for nine years. Today, I feel no shame or hesitation in being here; I have come to accept this life.

⁶ When I sat here for the first time, it is hard to put into words what I felt that day. And in these nine years, you are the first person who has sat beside me and spoken to me.

⁷ I came to Mumbai with my husband two months after our marriage. We were living in a rented house. I was in the final stages of pregnancy when my husband disappeared without a word. I searched for him everywhere, but there was no trace. There was nothing to eat at home, and the landlady was demanding rent.

⁸ I was looking for my husband while also searching for work. I am uneducated, so office jobs were out of reach. I wasn’t physically fit to do hard labour either. I tried hard to find some work, but no one hired me. They said I was not in a condition to work.

⁹ Someone told me, ‘Go to Haji Ali, Baba will fulfil your wishes.’ It was the final stage of my pregnancy when I came here. It was here that I gave birth to a daughter. She stayed with me here until she was five years old. Day and night, I worried about her future and her safety. I didn’t want her to live a life like mine, so I enrolled her in a madrasa. She stays there now and studies. I want to educate her and make her self-reliant so that she never has to depend on anyone. Whatever alms I receive here, I save for her education so that nothing hinders her progress.

तो आया था मेरे पास कुछ महीने पहले बोला घर चला मैं उसे बोली मैं इस जीवन को अपना चुकी हूँ अब मैं तुम्हारे साथ नहीं जाऊंगी। यहीं बाबा के दरबार में अपनी जिंदगी बिता दूंगी।”¹⁰

Shama’s story is more than just a personal tragedy; it is a stark reflection of the deep social irony where a woman’s dreams do not belong solely to her, they rather become inter-linked with a cultural hierarchy shaped by generations of traditions, expectations, and unspoken norms. The city that once embodied dreams now reappears as a symbol of hope for the future, in her daughter’s books. This journey of a mother, from the shattering of her dreams to saving her daughter’s dreams, depicts both the sensitivity and limitations of our society.

This is the tragic reality of our society and state, which pushed a helpless woman into the life of begging. It should be a matter of concern for all of us that there is no proper system in our society, which can save a person from this misery. I have spoken to many people living in begging, and huge number of them acknowledged a common perception that beggars have plenty of money. However, they said that they personally do not possess such wealth; perhaps someone else does. Yet, they too had no idea who these supposedly wealthy beggars are.

Shama is deeply aware of her situation as well as that of others around her. She says, “यहां जो भी बैठा है, उसके पास कुछ नहीं है। हर एक केवल ज़िंदा रहने के लिए अपने ज़मीर को मारकर दूसरों के आगे हाथ फैलाता है।”¹¹ This statement of hers shakes us up and demands that we look at the destitute with respect and not pity. She says, “लोगों को हमारे साथ भी इंसानों जैसा ही सुलूक करना चाहिए, बेइज्जती और बदतमीज़ी नहीं करना चाहिए।”¹²



Rupa Sadashiv Kale: Criminalised by Poverty

Age: 30 years

Rupa was born on the streets near Colaba Market in Mumbai. Her father, Somnath Kale, came to Mumbai from Solapur during the severe drought of 1975. Due to financial hardship and a lack of awareness about government schemes, Rupa was unable to receive an education. From a young age, she helped her mother make flower garlands and sold them in the market.

When Rupa was about 14 or 15 years of age, she married Sadashiv out of love. Just a year later, their first child was born on the street itself. Someone had told Roopa a frightening story that doctors in government hospitals remove organs or put something inside the body, which made her avoid hospital deliveries. Consequently, all four of her children

¹⁰ Today, I have made peace with my life. A few years ago, I received news about my husband. I found out that he had run away with another woman. They didn’t have any children. When he faced difficulties, he came to me a few months ago, asking me to come back home. I told him that I have embraced this life now. I will not go with you. I will spend the rest of my life here, in Baba’s sanctuary.

¹¹ Whoever is sitting here has nothing. Everyone is subduing their conscience and begging before others just to survive.

¹² People should treat us like human beings, they should not insult and misbehave with us.

were born on the pavement. Roopa feels that doctors in government hospitals do not speak properly to people like her and regard them as unclean.

A few years later, Sadashiv became addicted to substances (alcohol and cannabis) and stopped going to work. Rupa made numerous efforts to help him overcome his addiction, but she was unsuccessful. Due to his addiction, Sadashiv became violent; he would snatch the entire amount of ₹250-300 that Roopa earned from her hard work throughout the day, and if she resisted, he would beat her.

Once, Rupa, who once led a self-sufficient life by selling flowers and garlands, was arrested by the Colaba Police on charges of 'begging' and sent to the Chembur Beggars' Home. Our team helped secure her release from there. Around five years ago, the Colaba Police also took her two children and sent them to the Mankhurd Children's Home. Following our team's intervention, the children were successfully brought back. Later, Rupa enrolled both of them in Lok Mangal School in Solapur.

Rupa had all the necessary documents such as ration card, Aadhaar card, PAN card and bank passbook. But her belongings were burnt in the action taken by the police and the Municipal Corporation, which made it extremely difficult to get the documents made again. Aadhaar and PAN cards were remade, but the ration card could not be made again due to the 'No Selling Zone' being declared around the 'Gateway of India' after the 26/11 attack.

Sadashiv died almost three years ago. The reason was kidney failure due to alcohol. After this, the entire responsibility of the four children fell on Rupa alone. She started selling flowers again with her mother, but for the last two and a half years, the Colaba police have banned selling goods on the roadside. Rupa had to beg out of helplessness. When she extended her hand for the first time, she felt deeply humiliated and pained, so much so that she did not eat for two days.

Feeling unsafe alone on the streets, Rupa decided to remarry. She married a man from her own community with consent, though the marriage is not legally documented.

Rupa's tragedy is not that of an individual but that of a population living on the margins of urban life. Deprived of basic rights such as education, health, housing and identity, this population faces harsh treatment from state institutions, social prejudice and policy insensitivity. Rupa's story raises the question: does our system consider these citizens as citizens? In a city that is supposed to be a symbol of 'development', will women like Rupa be limited to mere survival?

Rupa's story shows how social systems and government policies make life harder for homeless and poor people in cities. Her struggles are not just personal; they are part of a bigger problem caused by the way society and the state treat people who are already marginalised. To understand Rupa's situation, we need to look at how history, social norms, and government actions come together to keep people like her on the edges of society.

Rupa's father, Somnath Kale, came to Mumbai from Solapur during the severe drought of 1975. Coming to the city seemed like a way to survive. But Mumbai, a city shaped by economic growth that benefits only a few, did not offer support to poor migrants. They ended

up on the streets, struggling to make a living. Even today, the city's focus on looking modern and clean often pushes the poor out of public spaces rather than helping them.

The ban on selling goods near the Gateway of India after the 26/11 attack is an example of this. The authorities wanted to make the area look tidy and secure, but they did not think about how this would affect poor people like Rupa, who depended on selling flowers to survive. And then the question also arises: is this the only way to secure an area? Or does this mean something else? Rupa's life shows how cities often treat poor people as a problem to be removed rather than as citizens to be supported.

Sadashiv started drinking heavily and using cannabis; became violent and took away Rupa's daily earnings. This violence shows how the pressures of poverty and hopelessness can make people turn to substance abuse. Unfortunately, instead of helping people like Sadashiv overcome addiction, the state machinery mainly uses punishment. When Rupa tried to make a living by selling flowers, the police saw her as a nuisance. They arrested her under the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act and sent her to the Chembur Beggars' Home. This law, left over from colonial times, treats poor and homeless people as criminals rather than helping them find a way out of poverty.

Even in her personal life, Rupa faced struggles. She gave birth to her children on the street because she feared hospitals. This fear came from stories passed around, showing how poor communication and lack of respect from health workers make poor people distrustful of public healthcare.

One of the hardest moments for Rupa was when the police took two of her children and sent them to a children's home. Our team managed to bring them back, but this shows how authorities often think it is better to separate families rather than support them. Rupa's story highlights how the government uses force rather than understanding when dealing with homeless families.

The government also failed Rupa when her belongings were destroyed during a municipal action. She lost important documents like her ration card, Aadhaar card, PAN card, and bank passbook. Even though she managed to get new copies of some of them, the ration card could not be made again. This incident shows how government actions can make life even harder for people who are already struggling.

Rupa's life shows how women in such situations often make choices just to survive, even if those choices are not really secure.

Rupa's story is not just about one person but about a large number of people living in cities who are left behind by society and the government. They face prejudice from others who see them as dirty or as a problem. Instead of getting support, they are often treated as criminals when they try to make a living. Even in a city like Mumbai, which prides itself on being modern and developed, people like Rupa remain on the fringes, struggling just to survive.

The real question here is whether cities like Mumbai are meant only for the privileged while the poor are pushed further to the edges. Rupa's story forces us to think about whether our system truly sees people like her as citizens or just as problems to be removed. If cities are truly places of progress, they should include everyone, not just the

wealthy and powerful. Rupa's struggle shows us how far we still have to go to build a society that respects and cares for its most vulnerable members.



Pravin: The Fall

Age: 35 years

Amid the crowd on a busy footbridge at one of the many suburban railway stations in Thane district, a man stood leaning on crutches. Balancing himself with one hand, he extended the other to seek help from passers-by. An old cap rested on his head, and his right leg was amputated below the knee. Most people ignored him and moved on, while some would give him a glance and go away. After about 30-35 people had passed by, a woman gave him a few rupees. He expressed his gratitude with a slight smile on his face.

When I approached him and politely asked for permission to speak, he looked at me with a questioning look. After I introduced myself and briefly explained my organisation, he agreed to share his story.

In the past, Pravin led an ordinary life. He used to sell cutlery items¹³ on local trains between Thane and Kasara. He got married. His wife worked as a domestic help in some households. Over time, they welcomed two children into the family. Days, months, and years went by. Eventually, the children grew a little older and started attending a municipal school. The family's financial situation was satisfactory, and there was happiness at home.

Five years ago, while selling cutlery to passengers on a local train, Pravin met with a tragic accident. Attempting to move from one coach to another, he tried to step onto the platform. Since he was carrying his stuff and the train had not yet come to a complete stop, he lost his balance, fell onto the platform, and his right leg was caught under the coach. It is worth noting that those familiar with the dynamics of Mumbai's suburban railway system understand that Pravin's actions were not entirely unusual, though ideally, he should not have hurried. In the accident, his right leg sustained severe injuries, and doctors had to amputate it below the knee. Additionally, he suffered injuries to other parts of his body, which required prolonged medical treatment. After spending 15 days in the hospital, Pravin was discharged and returned home, but his ability to work had been significantly hit.

After the accident, the entire financial responsibility of the family fell on Pravin's wife. She started taking on more work, but even that was not enough to meet their needs. Four months later, Pravin tried to restart his cutlery business outside Thane station. To support him, his wife borrowed money on interest and arranged the necessary stock. Initially, the business did fairly well, but local leaders and the police soon intervened, forcing him to move from the spot. Repeated harassment from local goons and the authorities eventually led to the closure of his business.

¹³ Local colloquial term for imitation jewellery; trinkets.

Pravin's physical condition no longer allowed him to sell goods on trains. Moreover, the situations after the accident had left him deeply mistrustful of society. As the family financial crisis worsened, another blow struck the family: one day, while working, his wife fell and injured her spine. Doctors advised her to take rest, and the only source of income of the family ended.

The financial condition of the family became very pathetic. Pravin made numerous attempts to find work, but his disability made any form of manual labour almost impossible. During this time, a resident from Diva suggested that he start begging on trains stations. The very thought of it sent a shiver down Pravin's spine, as it struck at the core of his self-respect. Yet, driven by the dire need to keep his family alive, he made a difficult decision, a decision that seemed beyond his worst fears and imagination. In the beginning, Pravin faced immense hesitation and fear. The thought of being recognised by someone he knew filled him with dread, as it would hurt his dignity. However, his desperate circumstances gradually forced him to come to terms with this harsh reality. In time, he learned to live with what felt like a living nightmare. His wife is aware of his situation, but he remains determined to keep this reality hidden from his children. To ensure this, he never begs nearby his own neighbourhood. Losing his fundamental principles and sense of dignity has been an excruciatingly painful and humiliating experience. The fear of facing his children with this altered identity is a source of constant anguish for him.

At present, Pravin manages to collect around 350 rupees per day, but this amount is insufficient to meet his family's basic needs. His wife has resumed work, but her health remains unstable. Every month, arranging money for medicines, rent, and other household expenses is becoming increasingly difficult. Under the government scheme that provides stalls for individuals with disability to start small businesses, Pravin has submitted an application. However, he has not yet received any response. Despite the hardships, he remains determined to support his family through hard work and continues to make every possible effort to improve their situation.

India does have social and economic security schemes for disabled and impoverished individuals, but their implementation is often slow and flawed. For people like Pravin, accessing government assistance is an extremely difficult task, as the process is hindered by bureaucratic obstacles, corruption, and slow processes.

Economic inequality is one of India's major challenges. On one hand, the economy is growing rapidly, while on the other, millions continue to struggle for their livelihood. Workers in the unorganised sector, individuals with disability, and marginalised communities have no recourse to a strong social security system. Pravin's story highlights how a single accident can push an entire family into poverty, with no effective rehabilitation policy in place.

We urgently need inclusive policies to ensure rehabilitation and livelihood for persons with disability. If Pravin had received a business stall through government assistance schemes, he could have possibly become self-reliant. It is imperative for both the government and society to work together to ensure that disability or accidents do not strip a person of dignity and livelihood.

Pravin's story is not just a personal tragedy; it also reflects the broader socio-economic system where disabled and needy individuals have to fight for survival. The inefficiency of government schemes, administrative apathy, and societal insensitivity have forced him onto a path he never wanted to take. It is crucial that society and the government create better employment opportunities for such individuals, enabling them to lead dignified and self-sufficient lives.



Aamir: Shame, Shadows and Solitude

Age: 62 years

On a December evening last year, outside one of the many dargahs in Mumbai, we met Aamir, a frail 62-year-old man. He sat in a dimly lit corner, partially obscured by the shadows of parked vehicles. It was as though he was trying to disappear, to make himself unseen. And yet, he could not afford to be invisible, not entirely, because his survival depended on the 'kindness' of passing strangers. Still, shame weighed heavy on him, pressing him into the darkness. His face bore the unmistakable signs of suffering, a story written in the wrinkles of his tortured countenance.

We approached him gently, introduced ourselves, and asked if we could speak with him. He agreed.

Aamir arrives at the dargah every morning at five and stays until nine at night. On a good day, sitting there from morning till night, he receives between ₹100 and ₹150. When we met him, it was already past six in the evening, and he had only managed ₹62. It is easy to believe that begging is an easy way to make money, but those who think so have never sat where Aamir sits. Through our work, we have spoken to thousands like him, and we have seen firsthand the exhaustion, the endurance, the relentless humiliation that comes with it.

Even that meagre sum is not guaranteed to remain his. It is at a very high risk of being stolen or snatched away. Aamir gestured toward a dark street nearby and said, "रात में अगर अँधेरी गली से गुजरे तो 2-3 लोग चाकू दिखा कर वो पैसे भी छीन लेते हैं।"¹⁴ So, he takes the longer, well-lit route, hoping to return to whatever patch of pavement he calls home with at least something in his pocket. Food, he said, was easier to come, but often at a cost. The stale, spoiled offerings frequently left his stomach in turmoil.

Aamir was painfully aware that every person who sat near him, every outstretched hand, belonged to someone with a history of misfortune and tragedies that pushed them into the abyss of shame and humiliation. It was survival, nothing else. A last, desperate attempt when every other safety net had failed them.

Even the simplest act of staying clean is beyond his reach, an unaffordable luxury. To bathe at a public toilet costs ₹30, where one gets a single bucket of water and then the tap is locked. He has to make a choice: either wash himself or his clothes. Not both. In

¹⁴ If I traverse that dark street at night, two-three men threaten me at knifepoint and take even this money.

summers, when humidity makes us overheated, sticky and extremely uncomfortable, when a huge number of people bathe morning and evening to feel human, people like Aamir, although they crave to take a bath daily, endure the suffocation of uncleanness and bear the torture of the heat as they cannot afford to bathe.

We asked why he had chosen such a secluded corner to sit in. His response was one of quiet devastation, “बहुत शर्म आती है। दिन में 70 बार मरना पड़ता है। अल्लाह पाक मौत दे देता तो बेहतर होता। दिन में 70 बार मरने से तो अच्छा होता।”¹⁵

He added, “मैं पहले बड़ीकाम करता था। सालों यही काम किया। आज मैं दरगाह के सामने बैठा हूँ, जब किसी ऐसे बंदे को देखता हूँ, जो किसी सेठ के जैसा दिखता है, तो चेहरा छुपा कर बैठ जाता हूँ।”¹⁶ His voice cracked. “कोई भी उधर से आता हुआ, जब ऐसा लगता है कि मेरे पहचान का है, तो मुँह छुपा लेता हूँ।”¹⁷

Then he pointed at the motorbikes parked around him, “ये बाइक वाले आते हैं, झिड़क के बात करते हैं। आस-पास थूक के चले जाते हैं।”¹⁸

In 2013, Aamir lost his wife. He never truly recovered from the grief of losing her. But life does not allow long mourning, it demands work for survival. He pulled himself together, and kept on working as best he could.

He told us that out of a life of 62 years, he toiled and worked for more than four decades. But age crept up on him, health deteriorated, and with it, came pain. His left leg pains continuously, leaving him dependent on a crutch. The right leg, overburdened because of the shift of the weight of entire body on it only, now also aches constantly. Still, he searched for work. A catering party in Gujarat hired him for four months, allowing him to do seated tasks. When the job ended, he returned home with ₹22,000, the entirety of his earnings. He gave it all to his two sons and their families and stayed with them. For as long as the money lasted, he was treated well. Then the signs started appearing. His daughters-in-law began raising their voices. They beat their children for trivial reasons, and started having frequent altercations with their husbands. Aamir knew what it meant. It was time for him to leave.

This, he told us, was the pattern. The money goes, and so does the welcome. And so, Aamir found himself on the streets, an old man with nowhere to belong. When we met him, he had been living this way for a month and a half.

His story is not unique. It is the story of countless other people who had worked, had families, had homes, and who, one by one, lost it all. And now, they sit in the shadows, half-hidden, waiting for a kindness that seldom comes.

What does Aamir’s life reveal? Is it merely a tale of poverty, homelessness, or humiliation? No. It is far more than that. His existence holds up a mirror to us all, exposing the

¹⁵ I feel immense shame. I have to die seventy times a day. It would have been better if Allah had granted me death. That would have been kinder than dying seventy times a day.

¹⁶ I used to work at catering sites. Did it for years. And now, here I sit, before this dargah. When I see someone who looks like any of my former employers, I turn my head, hiding my face.

¹⁷ Whenever I see a person approaching this side who seems like they might know me, I turn away, concealing myself.

¹⁸ These bike owners, they reproof us, and spit near us as they pass.

profound failures of our society, our state, and our economy. His life embodies a deeply unsettling reality: the ruthless machinery of social exclusion, economic precarity, and political neglect. Aamir's story is not an anomaly but a stark reflection of the structural violence that renders human dignity to a postscript. His circumstances lay bare the many layers of deprivation that push individuals like him to the very edge of society, unseen and unheard.

Aamir's overwhelming sense of shame testifies to how society constructs and reinforces deep hierarchies of respectability. His reluctance to be seen, his instinct to hide his face from former acquaintances, and his agony over the loss of dignity all point to how poverty is not just material deprivation but also an emotional and psychological burden. The reactions of passers-by as expressed through reproof and even spitting, show how the urban poor are not only marginalised but actively dehumanised.

His interactions with his sons' families reveal another harsh social truth: familial bonds, often romanticised as unbreakable, are often subject to economic conditions. As long as Aamir contributed financially, he was accepted; once his savings ran out, he was subtly but unmistakably pushed out. Our social contract, even at the most basic level of blood relations, seems to be dictated by economic utility rather than unconditional support.

Aamir's predicament exposes the brutal reality of an economy that extracts labour without providing security. Having worked for over four decades, his story contradicts the myth that hard work alone guarantees a stable life. His fall into homelessness underscores how workers in the informal sector, despite their years of service, remain extremely vulnerable to the shocks of age, health decline, accidents, and labour demands.

The cost of survival is disproportionately high for the poor. The ₹30 charge for a bucket of water for bathing, a sum negligible for the affluent but significant for Aamir and people like him, illustrates the financial barriers to basic hygiene. Even his meagre earnings from begging are not safe, as it is at a high risk of being stolen or robbed. This dual economic injustice, being forced into begging due to lack of opportunities and then being preyed upon even in that condition, shows how poverty is not just an absence of money but a condition of perpetual insecurity and continued alienation.

His experience with the catering job in Gujarat presents a rare but short-lived relief, highlighting the absence of long-term stability for ageing workers. That he had to leave his home despite handing over all his earnings to his family further underscores how economic dependence strips individuals of agency and dignity.

Aamir's situation raises pressing political questions about the failure of welfare mechanisms. His story is not one of personal misfortune alone but of systemic exclusion. That a man who has immensely contributed to the economy by working for over 40 years is left without any social security, or healthcare support signals the absence of a safety net for workers in the informal sector, which constitutes a significant portion of India's economy.

His struggle to find shelter and basic amenities also exposes the inadequacy of state interventions for homelessness. If public infrastructure such as toilets and shelters were more accessible and affordable, Aamir's life would not be as precarious. But in a city like

Mumbai, where urban planning caters more to capital than to people, the homeless are often left to survive on the margins.

The violence he faces emerges from two distinct but interrelated sources: physical violence and structural violence. Physical violence is manifested in direct harm inflicted by criminals: acts of assault, intimidation, or physical coercion that target him. On the other hand, structural violence is more subtle and pervasive, originating from those who look down upon the vulnerable, perpetuating discrimination, social exclusion, and stigmatisation. This duality of violence underscores how law enforcement agencies, by failing to effectively intervene or protect, not only neglect their duty but also inadvertently reinforce these structures of social exclusion and injustices. Through their inaction or bias, they allow both forms of violence to persist, embedding marginalisation deeper into the social fabric.

Aamir's story, then, is not just about him; it is about the failure of a system that allows people to fall into such depths of despair. His longing for dignity, his shame at begging, and his yearning for respect are not individual sentiments but a statement on a society that deserts its own people by otherising them.



PROCESS OF ENGAGEMENT

Before moving further, we must explain how we carried out the whole process of this work. In November 2024, we started an outreach activity with the purpose of identifying and carrying out intervention with the persons in beggary. As a team that has worked with this population for many years, we have always known that the day-to-day struggles of these people facing destitution, their hopes and their resilience, the silence of society regarding their plight and their criminalisation on grounds of being poor, remain largely unheard and submerged in the daily din of life. What we know about them is everyone's but their narrative. So, we decided that while we did the direct intervention with the homeless and destitute persons, we must simultaneously engage with them to listen to their side. We wanted to understand what it is that they have to say about the life they live. And therefore, we decided to write a report based on these conversations. That is why we designed a conversation guide and took down these conversations on it.

This report is an unusual attempt to document the lived experiences of people living in destitution. It benefits from the methods and rigour of scientific research guidelines on several accounts, as it has made use of techniques of qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences, challenges, and aspirations of persons engaged in begging within the urban landscapes of Mumbai and Navi Mumbai. And whatever affirmations we are making are inductive, that is, coming from what people have said rather than from any theoretical position. We have kept the process deeply rooted in participatory principles. This allowed us to ensure inclusivity, authenticity, and depth in understanding the realities of our target population. So, in essence, we have acted only as a medium of amplifying the voices of our client group rather than putting forth our own interpretation of things and phenomena regarding the subject matter.

Objective

The primary objective of this work was to document the original voices, the lives people live, the way they narrate. This also doubled up as an exercise in bringing the voices of people to the common citizen. It was our approach to investigate the socio-economic, and emotional dimensions as well as the vulnerabilities of the lives of persons engaged in begging in Mumbai and Navi Mumbai. By capturing their narratives, the report seeks to:

- Present the life on streets as experienced by people living those lives.
- Understand the lived realities and challenges faced by this group.
- Examine societal perceptions and their impact on the individuals' lives.
- Identify aspirations and future-oriented perspectives held by them.
- Provide actionable insights for policymaking and civil society to design interventions that address the needs and rights of this community.

While we were engaging with these individuals, we prioritised people with immediate needs and responded by direct intervention. For example, while doing the process, we traced the family of a woman who was mentally ill and had been wandering the streets for nearly six months, we provided healthcare intervention to several individuals who

were in immediate need. Furthermore, as this report is being written, we are in the process of engaging with more people for providing them care and support.

Definitions

Through this process, we aimed to achieve two interconnected goals. First, we sought to engage directly with individuals in the community to do direct intervention. Second, and more importantly, we wanted to raise awareness about the lived realities of our client group, challenging prevailing perceptions and engendering a more informed public discourse. A significant aspect of this effort is addressing the widespread lack of awareness about the legal framework surrounding destitution. Many people do not know that individuals in extreme poverty can be arrested under the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959. This archaic law remains not only on the books but also actively enforced in several states, especially Maharashtra today. In fact, Mumbai remains the city where Beggary Prevention Legislation is implemented most rigorously. To better illustrate the challenges faced by our client group, we have adopted the same legal definition of begging as outlined in the Act, which states:

“begging” means:

- (a) soliciting or receiving alms in a public place, whether or not under any pretence such as singing, dancing, fortune-telling, performing or offering any article for sale;
- (b) entering on any private premises for the purpose of soliciting or receiving alms;
- (c) exposing or exhibiting, with the object of obtaining or extorting alms, any sore, wound, injury, deformity or disease whether of a human being or animal;
- (d) having no visible means of subsistence and wandering about or remaining in any public place in such condition or manner, as makes it likely that the person doing so exists by soliciting or receiving alms;
- (e) allowing oneself to be used as an exhibit for the purpose of soliciting or receiving alms; but does not include soliciting or receiving money or food or gifts for a purpose authorised by any law, or authorised in the manner prescribed in Greater Bombay by the Commissioner of Police, and elsewhere by the District Magistrate, or in any part of the State by the State Government.

So, for selecting and interviewing individuals, we have relied on these definitions because, while at it, we also wanted to highlight the injustices of the legal apparatus that it inflicts on this population.

Background for the Conversation

1. What are the socio-economic and personal factors that contribute to a person’s engaging in begging?
2. What kinds of stereotypes do individuals engaged in begging face?
3. What are the living conditions and challenges faced by them?
4. How do public interactions shape the psychological and emotional experiences of individuals in this context?

5. What aspirations do individuals hold for their children's futures, and how do they envision pathways out of their current circumstances?
6. What can society and government learn from the lived experiences of this group to create more inclusive policies and support systems?

Our approach to this exercise was clear from the outset: it is not a purely academic endeavour whose impact would unfold over an extended period of time. Rather, it is a practical effort aimed at directly benefiting those with whom we engage in the course of this work while documenting their lived experience of destitution. Given this objective, adopting a strictly neutral and detached stance while interacting with participants would have undermined the very purpose of our inquiry.

Moreover, with team members who have spent the past two decades working in this field, there are certain realities we have come to understand with confidence. Our questions, therefore, have not been framed from a position of absolute neutrality but from an informed standpoint, a position that integrates our accumulated understanding and experience. This does not imply bias in our approach; rather, it reflects a recognition that some fundamental truths are already established through years of engagement with the issue at hand.

Areas and Individuals

The report is based on our interactions across diverse urban locations in Mumbai and Navi Mumbai. These areas include market spaces, railway stations, traffic signals, religious sites, and other public areas. In total, we spoke to 504 individuals ensuring diversity in age, gender, and social backgrounds. Namely, we interviewed individuals in the following areas:

Andheri	Haji Ali	Mumbai Central
Bandra	Kalyan	Mumbra
Borivali	Kharghar	Nerul
Chembur	Koparkhairane	Panvel
Churchgate	Kurla	Seawoods-Darave
Colaba	Mahalakshmi	Shivajinagar
CST	Mahim	Sion
Fort	Mankhurd	Thane
Dadar	Masjid Bunder	Ulwe
Dombivli	Matunga	Vadala
Govandi	Mira Road	Virar

Selection of Individuals

This process was guided by a flexible approach. During the preparatory meetings on methodology, it was decided that we should aim to cover as many locations and regions as possible. This was done to explore if there were different patterns or support systems available to people in different geographical sites. Prior experience of the team in community work also played a part in identification of clusters. Our team members visited the identified places across Mumbai and Navi Mumbai and engaged with individuals en-

countered during field visits. The selection process helped us ensure that we were engaging with diverse populations. We talked only to those persons who were willing to share their lived experiences and who gave informed consent to participate in a conversation. For the purpose of selecting individuals for interviews, we referred to the definition of begging given earlier. Specifically, we included persons who could potentially be arrested under the provisions of the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959.

We have leaned on a qualitative approach to illustrate things better. The decision to interview at least 500 people was our deliberate effort to balance depth with breadth. This number is larger than typically seen in qualitative studies, acknowledging the importance of generating deeper evidence. The number ensures a diversity of voices, capturing the varied experiences of individuals engaged in begging across different areas of Mumbai and Navi Mumbai. Additionally, the inclusion of a larger number of persons aligns with the dual purpose of this exercise: not to understand the lived experiences of our target population and also to facilitate direct outreach within these communities as part of broader assessment efforts. While a larger number might have provided even richer insights, practical constraints such as the size of the team and the time-intensive nature of the inquiry necessitated this pragmatic choice.

Throughout the process of interviewing these 504 people, our team also interviewed individuals who appeared to exhibit signs of mental health challenges. Although only one member of the team is a clinical counsellor, others, based on behavioural observations during interactions, occasionally identified potential signs of mental illness. This inclusion was approached with sensitivity and without labelling or making formal diagnoses, ensuring that individuals were engaged respectfully and empathetically. Observations were noted only as part of contextual understanding and were not used to categorise or define these persons as such.

Approach for Interaction

To elicit detailed responses, we designed a conversation guide with open-ended questions for being able to explore deeper responses and to understand the various dimensions of the lives of the interviewed persons. We framed the questions in Hindi to facilitate better accessibility.

The questions focus on topics such as:

- Personal perceptions and experiences regarding societal attitudes towards begging
- Living conditions and their underlying causes
- Emotional responses to interactions with the public
- Aspirations for their children's futures
- Perspectives on societal and governmental perceptions

Interview Protocol

Each interview was conducted in a conversational and non-intrusive manner, by creating an atmosphere of trust and openness. The team initiated the interaction with brief intro-

ductions and an explanation of the purpose of this whole exercise. The interviewed persons were informed about the voluntary nature of their involvement, and verbal consent was obtained prior to starting the interview.

Interviews were conducted respecting the individuals' comfort and availability. Observational notes were also maintained to capture non-verbal hints and context, and other relevant details that might enrich the understanding of the individual's experiences.

While talking to the individuals, we consciously avoided taking notes during the conversation as it can create a psychological barrier, distancing the interviewed person from the interviewer, and potentially impairing the quality and depth of the interaction. This method helped maintain a natural and engaging conversational flow, building trust and openness. To ensure accuracy and retention of details, the interviewer immediately documented the conversations post-interview, relying on memory and key observations. However, this approach has limitations, such as the possibility of omission of certain details. To address these, we talked to the participant in groups of two. This method helped us minimise the omissions in the process.

For taking interviews, we worked in groups of two, and adjusted team compositions as needed to respond to the emerging needs of the field. This flexibility allowed us to navigate diverse situations effectively, ensuring that we could approach each interview with sensitivity and adaptability. After completing the process of taking interviews, we conducted a workshop to reflect and share on our experiences, gather insights from the team, and deepen our understanding of the narratives we had encountered. This collective reflection not only enriched our inquiry but also helped shape a more nuanced and comprehensive report.

Ethical Considerations

This report ensures anonymity and confidentiality for all the persons we interviewed. Personal identifiers are omitted in the final report. Verbal consent was explicitly sought before noting down any information, and participants were assured that their involvement would not lead to any adverse consequences, nor any benefits that might influence their participation. Indeed, despite having clarified this, if we still felt from the responses that a person was engaging with us with the hope of some returns, we have not included such interviews in calculation of data. Also, if a person wanted to speak to us but did not want their case being documented we accommodated that as well.

Language and Representation

- a. We firmly believe that the term 'beggar' is deeply derogatory and should never be used to describe individuals in destitution. However, in this report, we aim to present an honest and unfiltered portrayal of the lived experiences of those who endure the harsh realities of begging, with experiences marked by humiliation, hurt, and deep emotional pain. In order to more accurately capture the emotions and the gravity of these individuals' struggles, we have occasionally used this term as this is how destitute persons are addressed. This is also being done to ensure that readers accustomed to this expression can fully grasp the meaning without losing the context in which these individuals are viewed and treated. It is important, however, to note that

our intention is not to perpetuate or reinforce the stigma and prejudice inherent in this word itself. Rather, we have used it to highlight the societal judgement and dehumanisation that individuals face when labelled in this way, which erodes their sense of self and dignity.

- b. To foreground the agency of the individuals who shared their lives and stories with us, we made a conscious effort to speak with each person about whether they wished to be represented in this report by their original names. Many people readily agreed to let us use their original names, understanding the spirit of the report and the importance of being seen and known. However, there were also a few who were unsure or hesitant. While they did not say no, they did not clearly say yes either. We understood this hesitation as a sign that they had concerns.

To maintain consistency throughout the report, and to avoid creating any differences in how people are represented, we chose to change the names of all individuals, including those who had agreed. We took this step with care, knowing that we might lose some of the power that comes from original naming, but believing that safety and concerns of our participants must come first.

As for photographs, there were certain participants who clearly wanted their pictures to be used as a way of asserting their identity and presence. It is for this reason that no faces have been blurred in the photographs.

This entire approach allowed us to balance visibility with care, and truth with responsibility.

- c. In this report, we have used the term transgender to refer specifically to individuals from the *hijra* community, being fully aware that the term *hijra* carries its own complexities. In some contexts, it is used with respect; in others, however, it carries derogatory connotations and is employed to stigmatise or demean. Out of consideration for this duality of meaning, and in an effort to maintain a respectful tone, we have chosen to use the term *transgender*.

It is important to clarify that wherever this report engages with transgenders, it specifically engages with individuals who identify as part of the *hijra* community, a group whose histories, social location, and experiences of marginalisation are unique to their community. This use does not imply representational coverage of the entire range of transgender identities. The challenges, perspectives, and forms of exclusion documented here are particular to the individuals belonging to the *hijra* community and should not be generalised to the broader transgender population, which encompasses a wide and internally diverse range of identities and realities.

It should also be noted that the primary focus of this report is on individuals experiencing destitution and engaging in begging. While we acknowledge that the *hijra* community faces a complex array of socio-cultural exclusions and economic vulnerabilities, these broader concerns lie beyond the scope of the present report. Our engagement with individuals from this community, as with others, has been limited to instances where they were found to be engaged in begging. This delimitation is not intended to overlook the layered and complex problems of their lives, but rather reflects the specific focus and boundaries of this inquiry.

- d. Throughout this report, we have made every effort to use gender-neutral language. However, given the structural limitations of languages, in this case, the English language, it is not always feasible to maintain complete gender neutrality in every instance. In cases where an entirely gender-neutral expression was not possible without compromising clarity or readability, we have occasionally used traditionally male pronouns as a generic reference to individuals of all gender identities. This choice is solely a reflection of linguistic constraints and should not be interpreted as an endorsement of male-centric language or a disregard for gender inclusivity. We remain committed to recognising and respecting diverse gender identities and acknowledge the ongoing evolution of language in this regard.

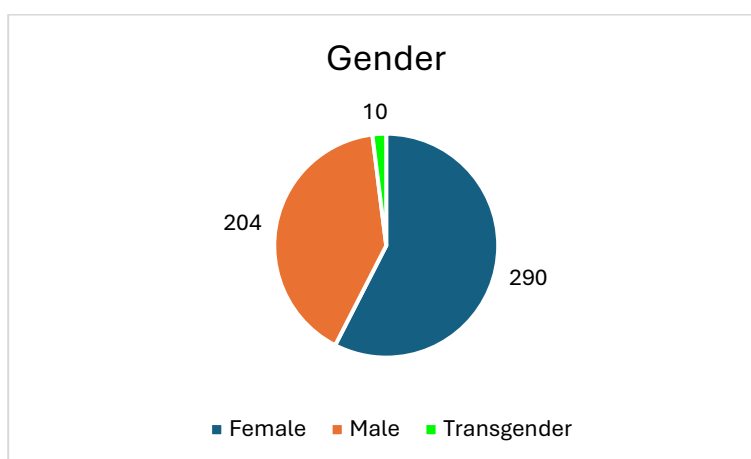
Challenges and Limitations

It must be acknowledged that an exercise of this sort has to have certain challenges inherent to its context. These include the transient nature of the target population, potential language barriers, and occasional reluctance of individuals to participate due to mistrust or fear of repercussions. To mitigate these challenges, the interviewing team adopted a patient and empathetic approach, emphasising the report's purpose and ensuring a non-coercive environment.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings presented in this chapter are drawn from a comprehensive analysis of the perceptions and responses collected during the conversations held process for this report. This chapter aims to highlight key themes and patterns that emerged from the narratives of individuals experiencing destitution in Mumbai and nearby areas.

We talked to a total of 504 individuals out of which were 290 women, 204 men and 10 individuals of the transgender community. It is crucial to understand that the numbers presented here are not mutually exclusive. The nature of our information gathering, which was rooted in in-depth conversations with qualitative, open-ended questions, means that not every interaction addressed every aspect of each theme. Unlike structured surveys that yield precise, quantifiable data, our approach prioritised capturing the nuance and complexity of personal narratives. Consequently, some themes emerged prominently in particular interviews while remaining absent or marginal in others.



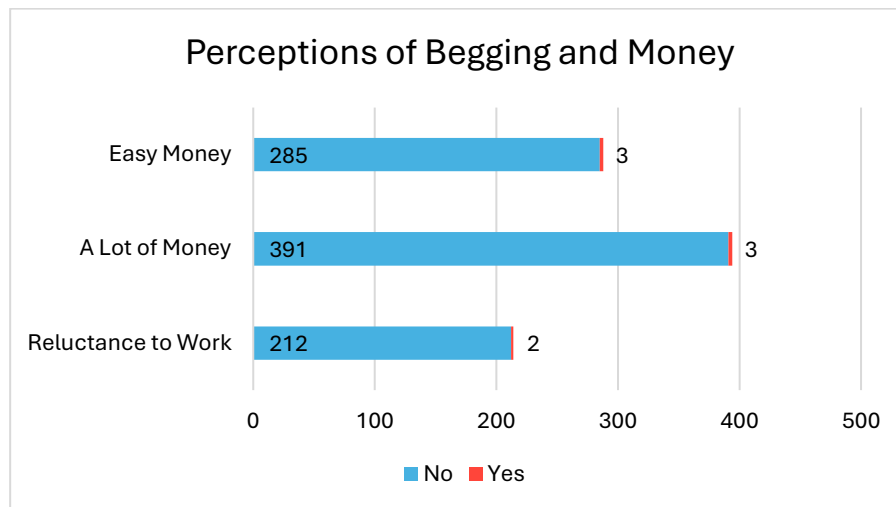
Additionally, readers may notice that the numbers presented do not always add up to the total sample size of 504. This variation arises because not every participant provided insights into every aspect of each theme. In some cases, participants offered nuanced, overlapping responses, while in others, they refrained from discussing certain parts of a question altogether. Therefore, the number of responses can sometimes be more or less than the total number of persons spoken with.

This choice reflects our commitment to representing the inherent diversity and fluidity of human experiences and the varied ways in which individuals articulate their struggles and perceptions. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with this context in mind, recognising that they do not constitute a uniform or statistically rigid representation. Instead, they offer a collage of voices and lived realities, presented objectively to allow the participants' perspectives to stand on their own.

Theme 1: Perceptions of Begging and Money

Public opinion often assumes that begging is simple, effortless and financially rewarding. The graphs show that this perception is almost entirely disconnected from the lived experiences of those who survive through begging. Only a negligible number of participants

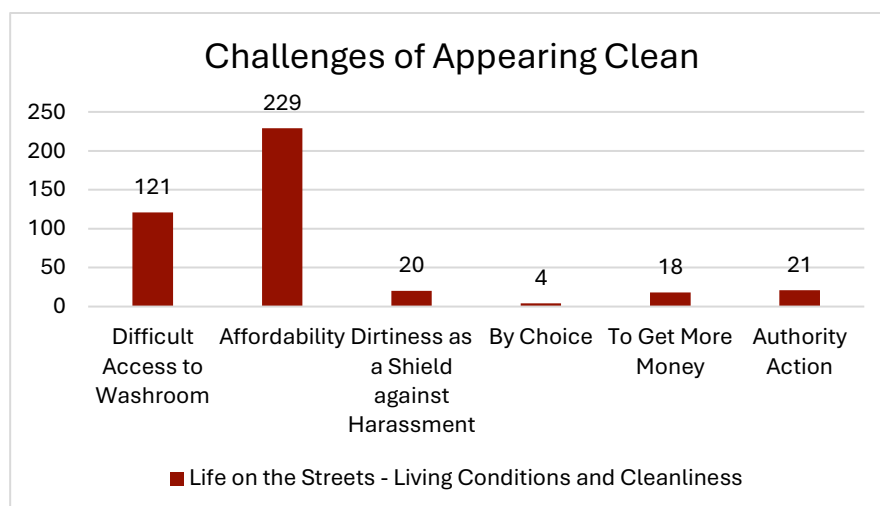
agreed with the idea that begging brings easy or substantial money, while almost all rejected these notions.



This contrast reveals a significant gap in understanding. People who beg often face humiliation, long hours under the sun, physical vulnerability and a great deal of uncertainty about whether they will receive anything at all. When viewed from outside, the act may appear uncomplicated, but for those who depend on it, it is marked by hardship and emotional strain. The findings highlight the need to question assumptions that present begging as a choice based on comfort or gain.

Theme 2: Living Conditions and Challenges of Appearing Clean

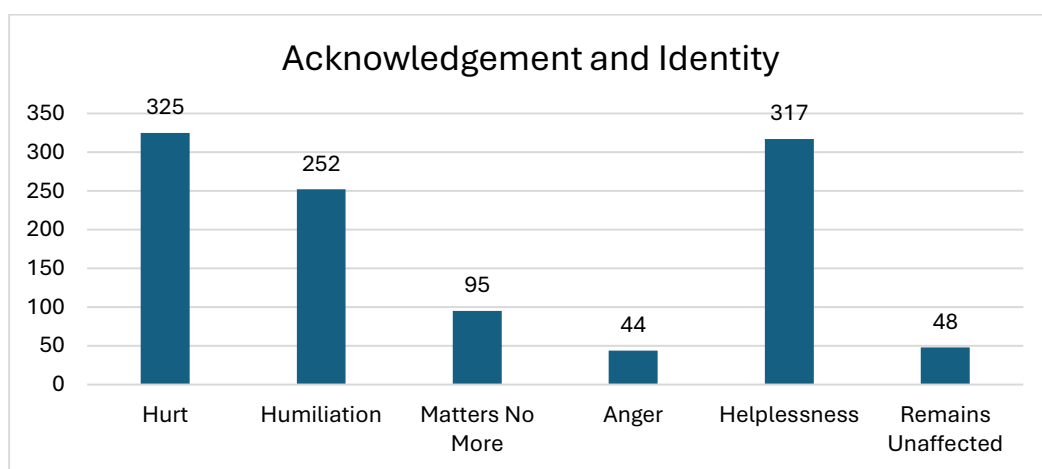
Destitution is often linked with poor living conditions and lack of cleanliness. The graph for this theme shows that a large number of participants struggle primarily because they cannot access toilets and bathrooms. Other difficulties, including limited affordability and the fear of harassment, also appear strongly in their accounts. Only a minute number of responses imply that uncleanliness is a matter of choice, and even that choice does not exist in isolation. It is shaped by circumstances in which people believe that appearing unclean may increase the likelihood of receiving alms



Encounters with government agencies and municipal authorities often lead to eviction or loss of belongings, further destabilising their lives. These findings challenge the simplistic narrative that destitution and uncleanness is a choice. This pattern further challenges the common belief that lack of cleanliness stems from personal negligence. Instead, it draws attention to the structural barriers that dictate everyday life. People try to make the best possible decisions within severe constraints. Cleanliness becomes difficult to maintain not because individuals lack the will, but because they cannot have access to the basic facilities required to maintain it.

Theme 3: Acknowledgement and Identity

The experience of homelessness and destitution significantly impacts an individual's sense of identity and emotional well-being. Lack of acknowledgement from society leads to feelings of hurt, humiliation, and a diminished sense of self-worth.

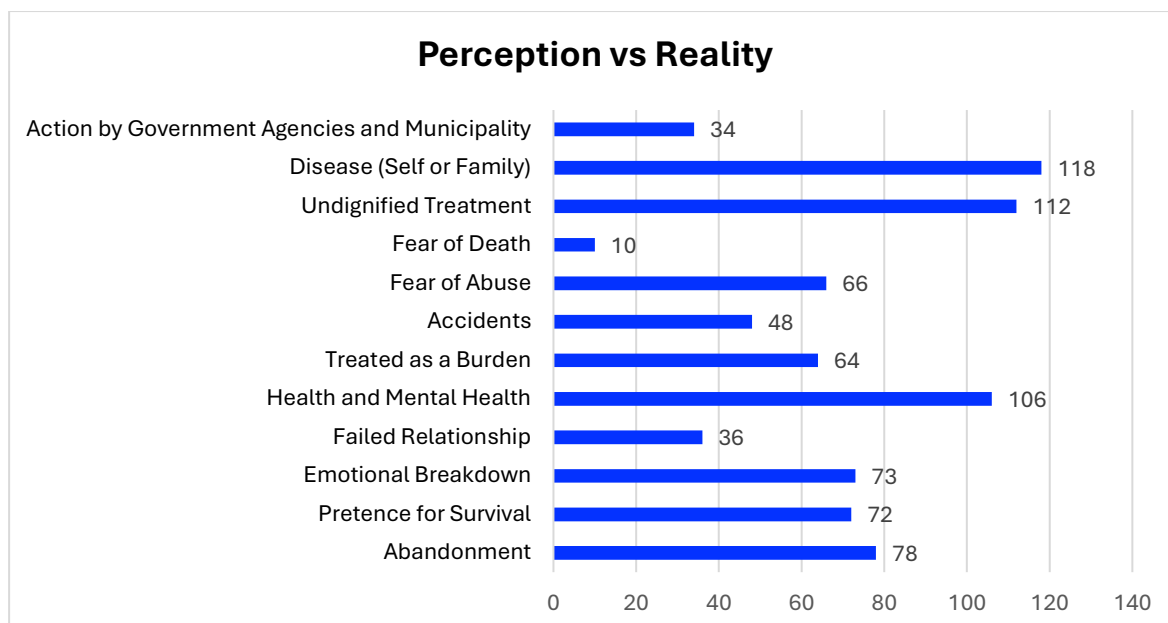


The graph shows that feelings such as hurt, humiliation and helplessness dominate the responses. These are linked to the way people are looked at, spoken to, or dismissed in daily interactions. A much smaller group spoke of anger or emotional resilience, and a few said that what happens no longer affects them.

These patterns reveal the deep impact of social invisibility. When people are repeatedly ignored, judged or pushed aside, it affects their sense of identity and self-worth. Emotional detachment, displayed by some, appears as a necessary coping mechanism. The findings here show how social attitudes shape not only material conditions but also the emotional landscape of those who live on the margins.

Theme 4: Perceptions and Realities

Destitute individuals often face perceptions that place them as socially problematic or burdensome. These perceptions not only affect their social acceptance but also impact their mental and emotional well-being. The data highlights several challenges related to how destitute individuals perceive themselves and how society perceives them.

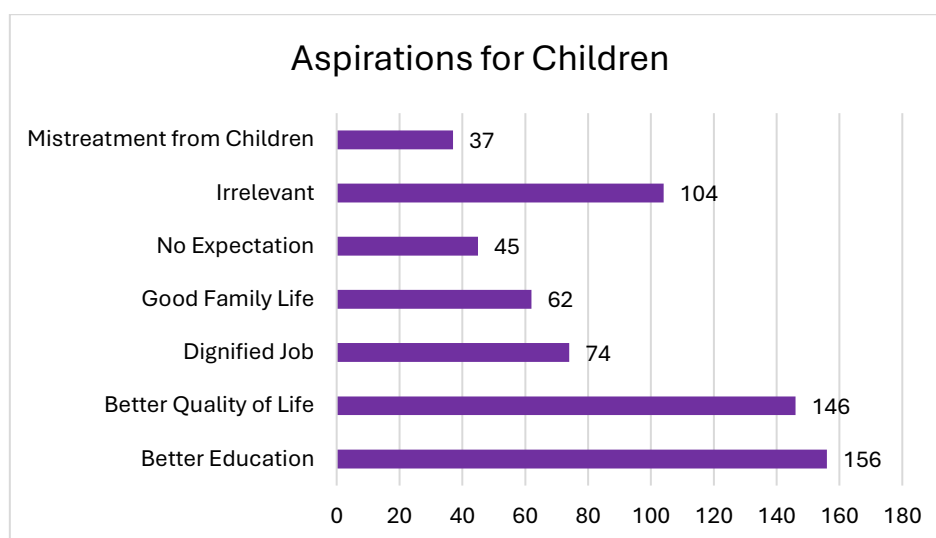


The visual pattern shows that vulnerability is integrated into daily life. Social stigma, unsafe environments and fragile support systems intensify the emotional and psychological difficulties faced by individuals. These are not isolated problems but part of a wider reality where uncertainty and insecurity are constant.

The findings point to destitution as more than a material struggle. It is also a continuous negotiation with social judgement and emotional fragility. The understanding of being a burden and the constant fear of abuse reflect how societal attitudes intensify the psychological toll of destitution. Additionally, untreated mental health issues and undignified treatment contribute to a cycle of marginalisation.

Theme 5: Aspirations Amidst Adversity

Despite their challenging circumstances, destitute individuals continue to harbour aspirations, both for themselves and their children. The data highlights their desire for a dignified life and better opportunities, reflecting a resilient hope for the future.

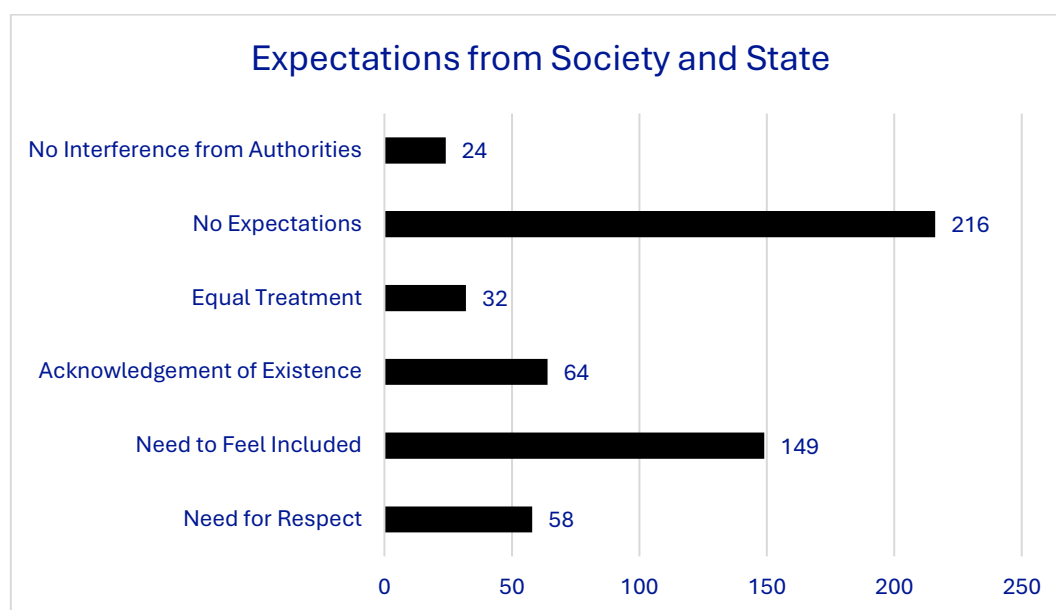


The graph shows that a large number of participants hope for better education and improved living standards for their children. Many also spoke of wanting their children to have dignified employment and stable family lives. A smaller group mentioned having no expectations, often shaped by the treatment they received from their children.

These aspirations underline the strong hope that people hold, even when their own circumstances remain unstable. Education features prominently because it is seen as a path that might allow the next generation to move away from the cycle of poverty. The responses also show that hope and hardship coexist, and that aspiration becomes a way for individuals to get a future that feels beyond reach in the present.

Theme 6: Expectations from Society and State

When asked about their expectations from the state and society, many participants expressed the desire to be seen and treated as equal citizens. The data shows that people need respect, inclusion and acknowledgement. Yet the most prominent category reflects those who have no expectations at all, which signals a loss of faith built over time. A small section of participants preferred no interference from government agencies and municipal authorities, suggesting that official intervention often creates additional difficulties, rather than easing out their problems. The absence of expectation from government and society is not an expression of contentment but of fatigue.



Postscript

This chapter has presented a broad picture of the experiences shared by 504 individuals across Mumbai and Navi Mumbai. The graphs highlight the distance between public assumptions and the realities expressed by participants. The voices in this chapter reflect lives shaped by vulnerability, resilience, hope and struggle. They remind us that understanding destitution requires listening not only to data but to the people whose lives the data represents.

THE MYTH OF 'EASY MONEY'

Begging is Easy Money

Almost universally, there is a belief that begging is an effortless way to earn money. Passersby often assume that individuals who beg are either unwilling to work or have chosen this path as an easy alternative to work and employment. This perception is reinforced by frequent news stories of individuals allegedly making substantial amount of money by begging. This creates the illusion that begging is immensely profitable. The reality is starkly different.

For most people engaged in begging, it is not a choice but a necessity driven by extreme poverty, disability, social exclusion, or systemic neglect. The earnings from begging are often barely enough to meet basic survival needs, such as food, water and shelter. Many destitute persons face constant harassment, violence, and exploitation, making their daily struggle far from 'easy.' Additionally, the physical and emotional toll of begging such as enduring humiliation, rejection, and extreme weather conditions, further disproves the myth of it being an effortless way to earn.

The gap between public perception and reality stems from a lack of awareness about the deeper structural issues that force individuals into begging. Instead of seeing it as a voluntary means of income, it is crucial to understand it as a symptom of broader social and economic inequalities. Addressing the root causes such as lack of education, unemployment, and inadequate social support, can help shift perceptions and create more sustainable solutions for those trapped in the cycle of poverty.

Out of the 504 individuals we interacted with, only three people expressed that earning through begging was easy. Every voice is important and the three people saying that begging is easy money is of course true for them. But they constitute a minutely small number. They hardly represent the general lot where each person shared a painful and unique account of how they found themselves in this dire situation. They were not begging because it was a simple or preferable choice, but because they had fallen through every social safety net, or because of tragic circumstances that had befallen them. The reality for most people is that begging is as strenuous a task as anything else and is far from easy.

For many, the challenges are compounded by various physical and mental ailments. Many of the individuals we spoke to are forced to endure long hours in the scorching heat, sitting or walking under the burning sun just to be able to live themselves and to survive or feed their families. Others live with disabilities of varying degrees but still spend their days roaming the streets, striving to earn what little they can.

The transgender community faces an additional hardship. Many of them have to clap their hands repeatedly to attract attention, which causes severe pain and discomfort in their palms. Elderly women, barely able to stand or walk, endure the pain of being on their feet all day, hoping for the slightest bit of charity. Young children, who should be in school and dreaming of a future, are forced to sacrifice their education and their future to negotiate with their wretched present.

People living with mental illness, who may not have full control over their mental faculties, often beg out of instinct. Their hunger and need for survival drive them to this behaviour, often without a clear understanding of why they are doing it. They are not fully aware of the act but are simply reacting to the overwhelming force of their basic human needs. Mostly, they are not even begging actively. They are sitting on the street with people throwing money at them.

The examples will not exhaust. Physical health, major surgery or operation, an ill kin and mounting medical bills, no documents or guarantor for job, unavailability of work, communicable diseases can all be reasons behind a person begging.

These individuals are not begging because it's easy or a choice they willingly make; they beg because they have no other means of survival. Their lives are not just a reflection of personal tragedy, but also a powerful reminder of the societal systems that have failed them. In multiple ways, their situation shows societal apathy also.



The idea that begging is a choice often ignores the complex realities that force individuals into it. While we are free to assume that those who beg deliberately choose an 'easy' way to earn money, the truth is that for most, begging is not a choice but a means of survival. It is often the last resort for those who have been failed by social systems, denied access to education, or excluded from the formal job market due to disability, discrimination, gender identity or some other reason.

For many, the alternative to begging is starvation or even death. Those who beg often face daily struggles, including police harassment, public humiliation, and even violence. Their earnings are unpredictable and usually barely enough to cover basic needs like food, water and clothing. Unlike employment, begging gives no stability, safety, or dignity, which further proves that it is not a chosen livelihood but a desperate attempt to stay alive.

On the rare occasions when these individuals refuse available work, it is usually due to deeper issues. They either have some or the other health problems which limits their ability to work, or they know that the work we are offering them is just for namesake, and we might give them some odd jobs for an hour or perhaps a day, then a vacuum. As a society, we advocate good ideals but when it comes to employ a person whose life we can change

by giving them some stable work at our houses, we fail because we too have prejudices about them that they might steal something, they might be wanton, they might not be able to handle the work as delicately as is required. So, eventually the options that we provide them of work are not real options. So, they remain in their perpetual situation of misery.

Thus, framing begging as a personal choice rather than a survival mechanism overlooks the larger social, economic failures that keep people trapped in this cycle. To break this cycle, society must move beyond judgment and focus on creating real alternatives through inclusive job opportunities and stronger social support systems.

A Lot of Money

There is another dimension to consider. In our collective consciousness, the image of the person in beggary is often associated with hidden wealth. This is a perception shaped by occasional media reports highlighting exceptional cases. While such instances do exist, they are rare and far from representative. Even in those cases, there are layers of manipulation or family breakdown which does not get covered in such media reports. The overwhelming reality is that individuals who engage in begging struggle to meet even their most fundamental needs. Among half a thousand of people we interviewed, only three stated that they earned what they considered a substantial amount. The rest painted a starkly different picture.

We did not explicitly ask participants to disclose their daily earnings, yet many voluntarily chose to share this information either by showing us their money or by mentioning the amount they had gathered in a day. Since financial disclosures were not a structured part of our inquiry, and because several individuals refrained from stating exact figures, we have refrained from presenting specific income brackets as definitive. However, based on the responses we received, a broad pattern emerged.

Some individuals, after spending hours at a fixed location or moving through the city all day, earned less than ₹100. A few reported making even less than ₹50. On occasion, we encountered those who managed to gather ₹500 or more in a day, but these cases were exceptional. Most people indicated that their earnings typically ranged between ₹150 and ₹350 per day. Those who engage in begging as part of a customary or religious practice tend to earn somewhat more and, crucially, are not subjected to the same levels of social stigma. In some cases, they are even regarded with a degree of respect.

This leads us to a critical observation: the act of begging is not inherently criminal, either socially or legally. Yet, society attaches different meanings to it based on context. When begging is tied to cultural or religious traditions, it is often tolerated or sometimes even venerated. However, when it is driven by economic desperation when an individual begs out of necessity, helplessness, or penury, it invites condemnation, hostility, and derision. The same act, then, is perceived through vastly different lenses depending on the circumstances.

Let us consider another perspective. Imagine, for argument's sake, that a person earns ₹500 a day through begging. Over the course of a month, this would amount to approximately ₹15,000. At first glance, this may appear comparable to the income of a security

guard in some middle-class housing societies in Mumbai or Navi Mumbai. But such a comparison is misleading.

A person without home incurs significantly higher costs for even the most basic necessities. Daily activities that housed individuals take for granted such as bathing, using a toilet, eating, and accessing drinking water, become financial burdens for those who live on the streets. The widespread assumption that homeless individuals spend less on their needs is deeply flawed. In reality, the cost of survival without housing is disproportionately high, both economically and in terms of personal hardship.

Consider food. Those with homes can reduce expenses through home-cooked meals, bulk purchases, and food storage. A homeless individual, by contrast, lacks these privileges. They often buy cooked food and enough only for one meal which are significantly more expensive than cooking at home. Even those who attempt to cook on the streets face challenges: they cannot buy groceries in bulk due to financial constraints and the absence of storage. Food left unprotected is vulnerable to rodents, stray animals, and theft. As a result, they end up spending far more per meal than a housed individual.

Access to drinking water is another struggle. While those with homes pay a nominal monthly water bill of around ₹100, homeless individuals often purchase water in smaller quantities at a much higher per-litre cost. Many resort to drinking unsafe water, which increases their risk of illness, which becomes an additional, and often invisible expense.

The lack of a safe and stable living space also exposes homeless individuals to financial, physical, and emotional vulnerabilities. Sleeping on pavements makes them susceptible to police harassment, municipal eviction drives, extreme weather, and threats from criminals. Worse, it makes them the subject of collective apathy. While these risks may or may not translate directly into monetary costs, they take a significant toll on mental and physical well-being, especially for women, who face heightened dangers on the streets.

Homeless individuals are also more vulnerable to theft. A housed person can store money, clothing, and essential items safely. Someone living on the streets has no such security, making them easy targets for pickpockets and opportunistic criminals. Many, therefore, are unable to save money, knowing that it can be stolen at any moment, forcing them into a hand-to-mouth existence.

Even basic hygiene comes at a cost. For those with homes, using a toilet is free. For the homeless, public toilets charge anywhere between ₹5 and ₹10 per use. A person who needs to use such facilities twice daily may end up spending ₹600 a month which is an enormous sum for someone struggling to survive. If we calculate this for a family, a major portion of the income would just go for this. The alternative, open defecation, exposes them to health risks, social stigma, and action from the authorities. Bathing is similarly costly. Paid facilities charge ₹20-₹30 per use, and washing clothes is another financial burden. Unlike housed individuals, who can do their laundry at home, homeless people must either wash clothes in unhygienic public places or pay for doing their laundry in a public bathroom.

Even something as simple as charging a mobile phone which is a necessity for staying connected to potential employers, family, or support networks, is expensive. While a housed person incurs an almost negligible cost for charging a phone, a homeless person often has to pay ₹20-₹30 per charge.

However, the true cost of homelessness is way beyond financial. It is the never-ending exhaustion of persevering in a world that is hostile by design to persons without shelter. Every aspect of life, from food and water to security and dignity, carries an additional burden. While those with homes can take privacy, stability, and protection for granted, a homeless individual must pay a premium for every basic necessity, often in ways that remain invisible to society.



This reality challenges the common belief that those in extreme poverty spend less. In truth, they pay more and often in ways that those who have never experienced homelessness fail to recognise. And what does this have to do with the notion that begging generates substantial earnings? Everything. As we have seen, the income of those who beg is generally meagre. But even if one believes that ₹12,000 or ₹13,000 a month is a considerable sum, it is crucial to factor in the disproportionately high expenses that come with homelessness. And for those supporting a family, these costs escalate dramatically.

Reluctance to Work

A common assumption about people who beg is that they do so because they are unwilling to work and because they are lazy, shirkers, or simply lack the drive to earn a livelihood. However, when we put this assumption to the test in our interactions, we found

that only two out of 504 people explicitly agreed with this notion. The overwhelming majority challenged this perception, either directly or through the narratives of their lived experiences.

Among them, 212 individuals unequivocally stated that they wanted to work but were unable to find employment. Their reasons varied. Some had physical disabilities or chronic illnesses that made them undesirable candidates in the job market, others lacked the necessary identification documents or a guarantor to secure employment. Then there were those who had once worked as daily wage labourers, but the unpredictable nature of such work meant long stretches of unemployment, eventually pushing them into occasional begging.

The remaining 290 people did not explicitly frame their response in terms of ‘wanting to work but being unable to find work.’ The stories they shared made it clear that their circumstances were shaped by systemic barriers rather than personal choice. Many had been cast out of their homes due to domestic violence, family disputes, or abandonment. Some were elderly with no family support to rely on.

When we posed the question about there being a common assumption that people who beg do not want to work, many responded with a counter-question, one that turned the gaze back onto us: “I am ready to work, but will you give me some work?” It was a response that was not rhetorical but deeply revealing. It pointed to the fact that work, in any meaningful sense, is not merely about willingness, it is rather about opportunity, accessibility, and a social structure that either enables or denies livelihoods to certain people.

Barriers to Alternatives

For many individuals engaged in begging, the path to alternative livelihoods is blocked by tall barriers. Disability and old age severely limit access to employment. Lack of education compounds this difficulty, restricting opportunities. Even those willing to learn new trades often find themselves excluded due to lack of acceptability and the absence of training initiatives tailored to their realities. Beyond individual circumstances, systemic neglect plays a crucial role. Government institutions rarely extend meaningful support, and rehabilitation programmes, where they exist, frequently operate with rigid eligibility criteria that exclude the most marginalised. Most critically, it is the trust deficit or the prejudices against homeless and destitute persons that limit and restrict the opportunities. Requirements for documents in many cases, requirement for a guarantor in some cases, communicable diseases, mental illness all serve as barriers. As a result, many find themselves trapped in a cycle where alternatives to begging are not just scarce but virtually unattainable.

The Internalisation of the ‘Beggar with Wealth’ Narrative

A very serious consequence of dominant social narratives is that even individuals engaged in begging often believe that others are making substantial amounts of money by begging. Despite their personal experience of hardships, many assume that others are significantly better. This perception is shaped by the same exaggerated media portrayals and societal myths that influence the broader public. The irony is stark: even those who

endure hunger, harassment, and daily struggles with survival internalise a discourse that obscures their collective reality.

In essence, this group of people, equal citizens of India by law, actually live on the outer edges of our society: neglected, marginalised, and subjected to indifference. Their struggle is not merely one of financial hardship but also of constant negotiation for dignity, safety, and recognition. To address homelessness and destitution meaningfully, we must first acknowledge the depth of their exclusion and the structures that perpetuate it.

THE STRUGGLE FOR CLEANLINESS

Cleanliness, for centuries, or perhaps, for millennia, has held a high place in the imagination of civilised societies as a virtue. It is not merely an aesthetic choice, but an essential aspect of human health, psychological well-being, and social harmony. The act of cleaning, of one's body, one's home, and the spaces one inhabits, goes beyond the physical, entering the sphere of the moral and the spiritual. It is a daily ritual, a quiet affirmation of life, order, and dignity amidst the daily chaos of our life. From the early morning when we so diligently bathe to the moment we settle into clean sheets at night, cleanliness shapes not only our external existence but also our inner being. The act of staying clean and cleaning our surroundings comes out as an assertion of our existence.

Yet, as we step out from our private spaces into public places, a strange, almost painful contradiction strikes us. Our homes may be dirt-free, the floors polished and gleaming, the air fragrant with incense or the subtle aroma of room fresheners. The glass panes of our windows, scrubbed clear, might well shimmer in the morning sun. And yet, beyond the threshold of these ordered spaces lies a reality so jarring, so bleak, that it compels reflection. Streets littered with waste and garbage, gutters choked with filth, market-places reverberating not only with the noise of trade but also with the sight of dirt. How does this paradox come to pass? How do the same hands that clean their homes so diligently participate, either actively or through indifference, in the making of this painful view?

The rise of neoliberal urban landscapes in our country, marked most visibly by the proliferation of grand shopping malls, are yet another example. These colossal structures, gleaming, air-conditioned temples of consumption, stand as testaments to human creativity and economic ambition. Within their confines, cleanliness reigns supreme. The marble floors are spotless, the air is cool and perfumed, every surface regularly wiped down by faceless people. Yet, step outside these temples, and the illusion vanishes. Just beyond the perimeter of the shimmering façades of these buildings, all this fades out like a good dream. Waste is carelessly scattered along the road and the pavements. Plastic, paper, rotting food, and leftover items mix together, projecting a saddening scene of neglect.

One is compelled to ask: whence does this filth come? The answer is as unsettling as it is obvious. It flows, relentlessly, from our own hands. We who clean our homes with such energy, perfume our personal spaces with sandalwood and rose, have externalised our waste, casting it out into the realm of the commons. The dirt, the refuse, the discarded remnants of our consumption do not materialise ex nihilo; they are the inevitable by-products of our carefully maintained interiors, and our lifestyle, in general. In protecting the godliness of our homes, we have rendered our neighbourhoods into dirty spaces.

This phenomenon, however, is not merely a question of personal or collective negligence. It is deeply interconnected with the larger social design. One cannot speak of cleanliness and filth without invoking the silent, suffering lot who exist at the margins; those who, driven by desperation, have migrated from the parched lands of rural India to 'our' cities. Their stories are rarely told, and when they are, it is often through the distorting lens of prejudice and disdain.

The rural hinterlands of our country, vast and varied, have long been sites of quiet despair. For generations, farmers and peasants have tilled the earth, their lives adversely affected by the changing nature of climate. Global warming, deforestation, and the relentless over-extraction of natural resources have irrevocably damaged the countryside as much as the rest of the planet. Crops fail not only because of drought or pests, but also because of policies that prioritise profit over people. Agricultural loans, when available, come with high interest rates and sometimes involve corruption. Banks, openly welcoming and trusting the wealthy, are not so trusting when farmers ask for help. Local moneylenders, always waiting, offer loans at exploitative rates, leading to inevitable tragedy.



And so, year after year, in silent orchards and empty, barren fields, husbands, fathers, sons consume paraquat,¹⁹ tie nooses, and walk into rivers, choosing death over a life engulfed in debt and dishonour. Their deaths, now reduced to statistics, leave behind families adrift, haunted by grief and hunger. Widows, orphans, and the aged are left with no recourse but to migrate, to abandon their ancestral lands and seek survival in the anonymity of the city.

¹⁹ Paraquat is a highly toxic herbicide widely used for weed and grass control in agriculture. Known for its effectiveness, it is equally ill-reputed for its lethality when ingested. Even a small amount of Paraquat can cause severe damage to internal organs, particularly the lungs, leading to respiratory failure. In many countries, its use is restricted or banned due to its association with accidental and intentional poisonings. In India, however, Paraquat remains available and, tragically, has been often used by distressed farmers as a means of suicide, especially in regions plagued by crop failure and mounting debts.

This example is intended here purely as an illustrative case of rural distress. While such tragedies have become symbolic of agrarian crises in India,

it is important to acknowledge that migration is an immensely complex phenomenon. People move from villages to cities due to a multitude of intersecting factors, including but not limited to economic hardship, environmental degradation, aspirations for a better future, lack of healthcare and education infrastructure, and social conflicts. No single cause can encapsulate the diverse reasons and compulsions that shape migration. To reduce migration solely to economic factors would be a serious oversimplification. Yet, in the face of such crises, people move, and the cities, already overpopulated, absorb them as labourers but not as citizens.

Living in Unclean Conditions					
Limited or No Access to Washrooms	Lack of Affordability	Dirtiness as a Shield against Sexual Harassment	By Choice	We Get More Money	Confiscation of Belongings by Authorities
121	229	20	4	18	21

Coming to cities, people realise that the city is no refuge. It is a hostile landscape, where hope is very soon chipped away by harsh realities. The destitute, the displaced, arrive with dreams but find only pavements, footpaths, and underpasses as their homes. Ironically, the very people who, in their villages, tilled the soil that fed the country, find themselves unwelcome in the cities they help build. They are labelled migrants, encroachers, parasites. They build roads, clean drains, carry bricks, yet they remain invisible, underserving of the basic dignities that the city reserves for its privileged inhabitants.

It is against this backdrop that the discourse around cleanliness acquires a new dimension. For what is dirt, after all? Is it an objective reality or a category constructed by power? We, who sit in our clean homes, often reprimand the homeless and the destitute, accusing them of spreading filth, of dirtying the city. Yet, we rarely pause to consider the conditions that compel them into these states of uncleanness. We fail to see that their dirt is not a moral failing, but a mirror held up to the society that has stripped them of choice, of dignity, of the basic means to remain clean.

Over the course of two decades of working in the field, our team has encountered these harsh truths time and again. When we embarked on this particular report, we did so with a desire to understand, at a personal, human level, the complex relationship between homelessness, begging, and uncleanness. We had a fair hint of the situation but what came out was still unsettling.

Among the 504 individuals we interviewed, many asserted that they strove hard to remain clean. Their appearance testified to this claim. Those who managed to remain in some

kind of a shelter often appeared somewhat cleaner. Access, it seemed, was the great divider. Those with access to bathing facilities, however limited, tried their best to achieve cleanliness as a marker of their humanity, a delicate shield against the contempt of the world.

In this regard, three things must be noted. One: section 2(1)(i)(d) of the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act specifies that a person who ‘seems’ to be existing by seeking alms, shall be considered to be a ‘beggar.’²⁰ When this clause is practised, appearance plays a crucial role. The raiding officer often relies on how a person looks to judge whether they might be living off alms or not. Two: we have a tendency to abhor dirtiness and want to stay away from someone who is not clean. And three: it is clear that appearance plays a role in getting employment, especially for informal but regular work. In the light of all the three observations, the question arises: Why would a person keep themselves unclean if it adversely affects their survival?

Interestingly, those who sought alms near dargahs, particularly, we came across more of such people at Haji Ali, who were often cleaner than others elsewhere. When asked why, they spoke of reverence, of an almost sacred obligation to remain clean in the presence of the saint. In that simple explanation is an angle of belief: cleanliness, for them, was not a matter of health or survival, but of honour and devotion to the Sufi Saint or their religious belief.

Opposed to popular perception, only four individuals admitted to remaining unclean by choice, and a mere eighteen people claimed that visible uncleanliness helped them get more alms. These numbers, small though they may be, are telling. They expose the fallacy of our assumptions and the cruelty of our prejudices. They compel us to reconsider the superficial narrative that frames the homeless and the destitute as wilfully dirty.

A huge number of 229 individuals, nearly half of the total, cited affordability as the primary barrier to cleanliness. Public bathing facilities, where available, charge between ₹20 and ₹30 per bath. Add to this the cost of washing clothes and the periodic purchase of soap (itself a luxury on the streets, where even basic belongings are vulnerable to theft), and the monthly expense easily spirals beyond their means. What emerges is a simple fact: cleanliness is expensive. It is a privilege, available only to the housed people. Worse still, 121 individuals reported either no access or severely limited access to such facilities.

And more sadly, 21 people narrated how state agencies and municipal authorities like the police and municipal corporation, confiscated their belongings without mercy. These authorities confiscate their belongings, including their clothes, and not sparing even children’s uniforms and books. This is not something occasional. It happens frequently. And this What then remains for such a person? How does one remain clean when stripped of even the means to cover oneself?

And then there were twenty adolescent girls and young women, whose testimonies shook us deeply. They spoke of using dirt as armour, of deliberately cultivating uncleanliness to

²⁰ Having no visible means of subsistence and wandering about or remaining in any public place in such condition or manner, as makes it likely that the person doing so exists by soliciting or receiving alms.

ward off the predatory gaze of men. Living on the streets exposes them to constant dangers of sexual violence and mistreatment, where cleanliness becomes a curse. A clean body, combed hair, neat clothes invite attention, harassment, and violence. Better, then, to remain dirty, to carry the stench of neglect, if it grants even a modicum of safety. The dirt on their bodies serves as a layer of protection from predators. Some of them even shared how people try to touch their hands inappropriately while offering alms, degrading the meaning of even that act which is considered noble in our belief systems. And so, despite the suffocation that uncleanness brings, they choose to remain dirty, for it offers the only defence, however little, against the constant threat of being violated.

These revelations force us to confront an uncomfortable truth. The next time we cover or wrinkle our noses at the sight of a person in beggary or recoil from the smell of the homeless, we must ask ourselves: what choices did this person have? What systems failed them? And most importantly, what part did we play in creating and perpetuating this reality?

In the end, cleanliness cannot be reduced to soap and water. It is a function of justice, of access, of empathy. A society that prides itself on its *swachhata* mission and its glittering malls, yet leaves its most vulnerable to rot in filth, is a society that has tragically misunderstood the very essence of cleanliness. True cleanliness, after all, is not merely the absence of dirt, but the presence of dignity. Until we recognise this, our cities will remain as they are: shiny façades masking the filth of our indifference.

EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TOLL OF INVISIBILITY

जब मैं काम करती थी तब फ़ख़्र से जीती थी, लोगों से बात करती थी। पर अब जबकि मांग कर जीना पड़ता है तो अंदर से काफी टूटा हुआ महसूस होता है।²¹

—Sapna Amar Kale

Almost all of us, at some point in life, have found ourselves in a situation where, despite having certain resources or even money that we expect to receive soon, we are compelled to seek financial help from someone close such as a friend, a relative, or perhaps even a sibling. We assure ourselves that this is only temporary and that we shall repay the money as soon as possible. We also know, deep down, that the person we are turning to understands our situation, for they are not strangers but people who care for us. And yet, even in such circumstances, we hesitate. There is a sense of discomfort, an inner struggle that makes us feel embarrassed, almost ashamed, to ask for help even from someone we consider our own.

Now, if seeking help from our loved ones can evoke such complex emotions, imagine the plight of those who live in destitution, for whom begging is the only means of survival. These are individuals who, unlike us, cannot turn to friends or family for support. They are forced to approach complete strangers on the streets, seeking not a loan but charity, which is something they know they can never repay. Their need is immediate and desperate, and their appeal is not for a large sum but often for something as basic as food or medicine for that very day.

The emotional and psychological burden of such an act is immense. To expose one's vulnerability so publicly, to repeatedly face rejection, indifference, or even contempt, leaves deep scars on the human spirit. It is not merely the physical act of extending a hand or uttering a few words of request; it is the constant negotiation with one's own dignity, a continuous reminder of one's helplessness. Such experiences cannot be measured in material terms. The cost is emotional, psychological, and deeply human.

This daily act of seeking alms dispossesses a person, bit by bit, of the natural sense of self-worth that every human being carries. The very act of asking, especially when it is repeated endlessly and often met with silence or disdain, gradually diminishes the person's faith in their own existence and value. To be ignored, avoided, or looked down upon becomes a part of their everyday experience. And what is perhaps even more painful is the realisation that their need, however genuine, does not move others enough to respond. Over time, such repeated encounters create an internal wound filled with feelings of rejection, shame, helplessness, and hurt.

We must also understand that begging is not simply a physical act performed in public spaces; it is an emotional struggle that continues long after the hand is lowered, or the voice falls silent. The person is left carrying the weight of how they were seen, treated, and humiliated. For most of us, seeking help from someone known is momentary, and we

²¹ When I used to work, I lived with pride and spoke with people. But now, as I have to make a living by begging, I feel quite broken from within.

can find comfort in our sense of being able to repay them. But for those who beg, there is no such comfort. Each act of asking is a reminder of a suffocating isolation: a bitter realisation that they stand alone in the world, with neither support nor refuge.



Having spent nearly two decades engaging with life on the streets, we, as a team, felt a deep responsibility to foreground the emotional dimensions of begging; facets that are often overlooked or dismissed in public discourse. To this end, we included a specific question in our conversations aimed at bringing these experiences to light. The question had two intertwined aspects: the pain of neglect and invisibility, and the emotional toll this neglect takes on those who beg. We phrased it thus: “अक्सर लोग आपके ऊपर कोई ध्यान दिए बिना ही आपके पास से गुजर जाते हैं। उन्हें आपके होने का सही मायने में कोई एहसास नहीं होता। ऐसे में जब आपको लोगों से पैसे मांगने पड़ते हैं तो आप क्या महसूस करते हैं?”²² The responses we received were varied in their expression, but they shared a saddening commonality. Each one revealed, in its own way, a depth of hurt that left us shaken. It was not only what was said, but the silences in between, the pauses, the eyes getting moist and turning away, that broke our hearts.

It is in this context that we must reflect on what it means to beg. It is not an act of laziness or a lack of willingness to work, as it is often assumed. In maximum cases, it is the last resort of those who have exhausted every other means of survival. They have fallen through the safety nets of society: abandoned by family, excluded by the community, and forgotten by the state. They carry within themselves stories of migration, loss, illness, old age, or disability; each story filled with suffering that led them to the streets.

²² Often, people pass by you without paying the slightest attention. They remain entirely unaware of your presence. In such a situation, what do you go through when you are compelled to ask them for money?

The emotional and psychological cost of begging, therefore, is far greater than what meets the eye. It is a life lived in the shadow of perpetual humiliation, where every moment is a negotiation between hunger and dignity, between survival and shame. And perhaps the most tragic part is that society fails to see this unseen suffering. It judges the person but remains blind to the circumstances that have forced them into such a life.

The findings drawn from our field interactions offer a unsettling insight into the emotional conditions of people who beg. A close reading of the feelings and their frequency reveals that the experience of begging is not only materially precarious but also psychologically exhausting and physically taxing.

Among the most frequent are **‘hurt’ (325 instances)** and **‘helplessness’ (317 instances)**, followed closely by **‘humiliation’ (252 instances)**. This suggests that begging is not simply a practice of economic desperation, it is saturated with emotional pain, marked by repeated wounds to one’s sense of self and agency.

Importantly, while *hurt* and *humiliation* may often co-occur, they are not the same. Hurt, in this context, emerges as a response to being seen and treated as less than human. It signals pain caused by rejection, neglect, or the apathy of strangers who walk past without acknowledgement. Hurt implies that the person still retains the capacity to feel, to desire recognition, and to long for a basic human treatment, even when it is denied. It is a wound that bleeds inward. But at the same time, we must also acknowledge that a person engaged in begging who goes through all of this and still feels hurt has not yet surrendered their sense of self.

Feeling/Emotion	Frequency (not mutually exclusive)
Hurt	325
Humiliation	252
Helplessness	317
Matters no more	95
Anger	44
Remains unaffected	48

By contrast, humiliation is a more profound injury to one’s dignity. It is not just being ignored but being *seen* and then degraded: being mocked, scolded, chased away, or treated as an object of scorn. If hurt bruises the heart, humiliation crushes the soul. It publicly takes away someone’s dignity, and in that sense, it is more violent. While hurt can still evoke empathy and sorrow, humiliation often keeps leaving behind a residue of shame that silently keeps accumulating on the conscience eroding the individual’s sense of self-respect.

Equally telling are the responses like ‘matters no more’ (95 instances) and ‘remains unaffected’ (48 instances). These two phrases may appear synonymous at first glance, but they mark very different psychological states. *Matters no more* suggests a painful evolution; a shift from feeling to numbness. It is not indifference, but exhaustion. These are individuals who once felt pain, but the pain has become so constant, so unacknowledged, that it has resulted in a numbness. It is the voice of someone who has cried out too many times in vain that he no longer expects to be heard.

On the other hand, *remains unaffected* conveys something colder, perhaps more strategic. It implies a cultivated detachment, a conscious effort to protect oneself from emotional damage. Unlike *matters no more*, which is passive and weary, *remains unaffected* is often an act of survival, a psychological shield. It reflects the need to function, to keep asking, despite knowing that most will not respond with kindness.



Only 44 instances were marked under ‘**anger**’, a surprisingly low number in contrast to the far more prevalent registers of *hurt*, *humiliation*, and *helplessness*. This relative absence of anger is crucial. It suggests that the social conditions in which people beg do not even afford them the emotional space to protest. Where anger could have been a response to injustice, it is replaced by internalisation of despair and desolation. When the body is starved and the spirit is weary, anger becomes a luxury beyond reach.

What emerges, then, is a picture of people who are not simply poor, but profoundly unseen and unacknowledged. To beg is not simply to ask for alms; it is to repeatedly risk one’s emotional and psychological well-being in an unkind public sphere. The high frequency of *hurt* and *helplessness*, combined with somewhat lower number of *humiliation* and the slide towards emotional deadening (*matters no more*, *remains unaffected*),

shows us the devastating human cost of this condition. And, tragically, society continues to judge the act without ever peeping into its inner toll.

The emotional reactions of people who beg are not just their personal problems; they reflect deeper issues in our society. The hurt, shame, and helplessness they feel go beyond individual pain. They highlight a system that has normalised exclusion, erased empathy for the vulnerable, and turned neglect into an ordinary, routine thing. The emotions of those who beg offer a window into the reality of urban life today: disconnected, indifferent, and focused much more on productivity than on caring for others.

When so many say they feel that “it matters no more,” it’s a sign of a society that has stopped paying attention. When human suffering no longer prompts any response, we fail not just those who are suffering, but also our shared sense of morality, our common purpose of being. The emotional numbness seen in those who beg mirrors the moral numbness of those who walk by. We begin to accept, almost without realising, kind of mechanically, that some lives are not worth paying attention to, they are unworthy of any kind of engagement. Eventually, the individual in beggary emerges as no longer a moral test but a visual inconvenience. In turning away from them, we turn away from an entire realm of shared humanity.

The fact that anger is so rare among those who beg is quite telling. Anger, when it comes from injustice, has the potential to inspire action and show that something is wrong. Its absence suggests that many who beg no longer believe they deserve justice or change or even justice is possible for them in the larger perspective. They have not just lost hope; they have been quietly taught to accept that things will never get better.

These emotional insights ask us to do more than feel pity. They call for self-reflection. What kind of society creates so much silent suffering? What does it say about us when people must suppress their anger just to survive? If humiliation has become the price of survival, our cities are not just failing, they are actively causing harm. The ethical response is not just to feel sorry, but to rethink how we relate to suffering, how we build our public life, and how we allow ourselves to truly feel.

PERCEPTIONS VERSUS REALITY

Begging is often misunderstood. It is seen through a narrow, moral lens: as a sign of personal failure, laziness, addiction and even cunning. This view, both in public perception and government, oversimplifies a deeply complex reality. It misses the deeper emotional and structural causes that push people onto the streets and into destitution. It also fails to account for the hidden injustices of class, the failures of welfare, the traumas of abandonment, and the violence of urban anonymity. This superficial understanding leads not only to ill-informed public attitudes but also to punitive state policies that criminalise the poor.



By focusing only on the act of begging, we fail to ask why begging becomes the only option left for certain individuals. The real question is not why people beg, but what makes them beg and why it becomes their last resort. Here is a lack of agency involved which is ignored and overlooked in the simplification. Based on in-depth conversations with persons in begging, this document provides an important window into the real triggers that lead to such a life. Contrary to popular belief, these are not lives lived casually, they reflect accumulated suffering: of abandonment, of mental and physical health breakdowns, of social humiliation, of abandonment, and of state crackdown. These narratives, we hope, will help us shift our gaze from blaming the individual to understanding the failures of society, state institutions, and the systems of care that have broken down. The details presented here offer both parallel and perpendicular cross-sections of beggary. The parallel view shows common patterns: emotional break-down, failed relationships, treated as a burden, loss of family support, poor mental health, etc. The perpendicular view takes us deeper, into personal details of rupture; the loss of dignity, the disappearance of hope. Together, these perspectives reveal beggary not as a fixed condition, but as something shaped by overlapping forms of social neglect, structural apathy, institutional

failure, and constrained agency. They help us see both the common patterns and the isolated, painful journeys behind these figures. They are not just numbers, they represent real people with real wounds: emotional, physical, social, and psychological. In what follows, we examine the different themes that emerged in these life histories, highlighting the wider social and emotional context.

Abandonment and Failed Relationships

Conversations with individuals in destitution, conducted for the purpose of this report, reveal that begging is almost never a matter of choice. Rather, it is a Hobson's choice, and no real choice at all. It is usually the culmination of a series of ruptures: familial, social, emotional, state and institutional. These are not merely sentimental backstories but real, decisive moments in people's lives when their last bonds with family, community, and society were severed. In the data, 78 people cited abandonment, and 73 people pointed to broken or failed relationships as a central reason behind their descent into begging. These numbers speak of profound human losses: lovers turned strangers, families turned hostile, communities turned indifferent, society turned offhand.

After their marriage, Shama's husband brought her to Mumbai in search of greener pastures: a city that promised work, dignity, and the chance to build a better life. For a while, things went well. They lived with hope, although in modest economic conditions. Then, without warning, his hunger for another woman's body pulled him away. Not quarrels, not conflict, but just lust, raw and selfish. He discarded Shama like an inconvenience, leaving her alone in an unfamiliar city, far from home, heavily pregnant with the child they had made together.²³

The betrayal was brutal not only in its abandonment but also in its timing. She was nearing the end of her pregnancy when he vanished. Suddenly, she had to fend not just for herself but for the life growing inside her. Hunger, as we all know, is intensely physical, acutely immediate, and painfully constant. There is no way we can evade it. Moreover, she had to pay the rent for the tiny room they had once shared. There was no family to call, no support system to turn to, only the unfeeling expanse of the city, a concrete jungle that mocked at her existence, and laughed at her solitude, silently bearing witness to her disappearance into its margins.

She searched for work everywhere. Asked at homes, looked in markets, wandered through lanes. But her visibly pregnant body was enough for people to turn her away. No one wanted to hire a woman who looked like she might collapse any day. And so, when the water rose above her head, she turned to begging. Not because she wanted to, but

²³ This narrative is told entirely from Shama's point of view. It is shaped not just by what she remembers, but by how she has felt, seen, and made sense of things over the past nine years. Her account does not offer a neutral or complete picture of the past, but rather, a version of events as they survive in her mind. We were not able to speak with her husband, so his side of the story remains unknown. What we present here, then, is not the whole truth, but one person's way of telling it. This is not a shortcoming, but a reminder that every story is shaped by the person who tells it: by their experiences, their position in the world, and the inner world they carry within their self. At the same time, Shama's narrative carries its own truth and significance. It reveals how she has lived and made sense of her circumstances, and how she negotiated with her reality, and in doing so, it offers valuable insight into the emotional and social realities that facts alone may not fully capture.

because every other door had been shut quietly or slammed in her face. It was not a profession, but simply a means to survive. Better to live than die. Begging, for her, was like clutching at a straw while drowning: desperate, undignified, and yet, utterly human, in the face of all that she had experienced. Yet, despite this emotional fracture, she continued to pretend that she is okay.

Pretence of Survival

Despite her emotional fracture, Shama continued to pretend that she is okay, like many others do: a survival tactic visible in the lives of 72 people we interviewed. This ‘pretence’ is not self-deception but a performance of normalcy, a thin veil stretched over emotional damage. It is a mechanism of self-preservation in a world that punishes visible vulnerability. When people say, “अब तो आदत सी हो गई है”²⁴ or “अब फ़र्क़ नहीं पड़ता,”²⁵ it does not mean that they have truly come to terms with their condition and normalised it. Because as our conversations deepened, it became evident that such statements are often a façade which cover a pretence necessary for survival. Beneath these words lies a quiet torment which refuses to subside, which refuses to die down. The erosion of dignity, the pain of existing in a subhuman condition, and the daily experience of being treated as lesser citizens continue to gnaw at the very being of these men and women.

Physical and Mental Health Issues

A significant number of participants (106 individuals, 21 percent) identified mental or physical health issues, whether their own or those of a close family member, as the primary trigger that led them into a life of begging. This number is striking and tells of the intersection between illness and destitution. In most of these narratives, health problems did not merely appear as a background detail, but as a turning point of lives and a moment when a life, already crumbling under the weight of various struggles, began to collapse entirely.

In these accounts, illness carried with it a heavy economic toll. Several individuals narrated how a single major illness quickly turned into a chain of misfortunes: job loss, mounting debt, and sale of household items, etc. The urban poor, most of whom depend on daily wages in the informal sector, have no buffer against such shocks. When illness strikes, income dries up almost immediately. Expenses, however, begin to rise. The result is often catastrophic: families find themselves choosing between food and medicine.

These stories also bring to light the serious inaccessibility of public healthcare for people who are homeless or living in destitution. Although medical professionals are bound by their ethical duty to treat every patient with care, respect, and dignity, the lived experiences of these individuals often reflect a different reality. Many of them face neglect, mistreatment, and clear discrimination when they go to hospitals and public clinics.

Doctors and hospital staff frequently treat them as if they are not worthy of proper care. In many cases during medical examinations, doctors refuse to come close, choosing instead to observe the patient from a distance or speak without making physical contact.

²⁴ Now, it has come to feel like a habit.

²⁵ Now, it doesn't matter anymore.

This behaviour strips such patients of their dignity at a time when they are most vulnerable and in need of compassion and care.

Examining a patient from a distance may lead to several harmful consequences. It increases the risk of misdiagnosis, as important physical signs may be missed or overlooked. Conditions that require a thorough physical examination may go undetected or be poorly understood. As a result, patients are at the risk of being given incorrect treatment. For people already living in extreme hardship, such medical neglect can worsen their illness, lead to long-term health complications, or even become life-threatening. The inadequacy of health infrastructure and the resultant patient-load makes the situation worse.



Pramila's daughter was suffering from a serious kidney condition and had been admitted to a government hospital in Mumbai for treatment. As both her kidneys had begun to fail, her condition worsened rapidly, and despite the medical intervention, she passed away. Pramila, originally from Solapur, had been living in the city on her own. She had separated from her husband due to years of domestic violence and had no family or support system to turn to. Isolated and vulnerable in an overwhelming city, she found herself face to face with an unbearable situation. By the time her daughter died, the hospital bills had accumulated to ₹7,000. Though it was a public hospital, the authorities refused to release the body of her daughter until the dues were cleared. Desperate and grief-stricken, Pramila pleaded for help. She appealed to strangers for charity, and in doing so, she was forced to beg just to be able to claim her daughter's body and perform her final rites with dignity.

Furthermore, mental illness, and the stigma that continues to surround it, adds another difficult layer to the already complex challenges of poverty and destitution. Some participants shared that having a family member with a mental health condition brought severe hardship into their lives. In families with limited means, such a situation becomes a significant source of strain, both financial and emotional.

Socially, mental illness is still widely misunderstood. It is often seen not as a health condition, but as madness or even as a sign of possession. Instead of receiving care or support, individuals with mental illness as well as their families are frequently mocked, feared, or excluded. This social stigma deepens their isolation and suffering.

We met several individuals living with mental illness.²⁶ Some had been abandoned by their families; others had never had any family support. It is because of the near-total absence of work or livelihood opportunities for people with mental illness that such people are left with no other choice but to beg, when even family and society are unable to support. Similarly, those with physical disabilities, limb loss, paralysis, or neurological conditions such as epilepsy, face immediate rejection, both socially and in terms of employment. For people with such physical conditions, doing work is a huge limitation. They can, at best, work in a very limited way. But even the work they are capable of doing through willpower and effort is not available to them, as their bodies become sites of discomfort for others. This results in a denial of opportunity, not to say further marginalisation.

In all these cases, illness emerged not as an isolated misfortune but as the beginning of social exile. Without institutional support, without family able or willing to help, and with society largely indifferent to the suffering of these men and women, begging appeared as the only means left to survive. For example, Chitra, a 29 year old woman, has paralysis in one of her arms and one leg. Even her husband has disability and begs. She says, “मेरे एक हाथ और एक पैर में लकवा हुआ है। मुझसे काम भी नहीं होता और कोई मुझे काम भी नहीं देता। मेरी दूसरी शादी है।²⁷ पति भी अपाहिज है, वो भी भिक्षा मांगता है। मेरी स्थिति बहुत खराब है। मैं रंडीपना नहीं करती, या चोरी नहीं करती। भिक्षा मांगती हूँ तो क्या ये गलत है? तीन बच्चे हैं, उनके लिए तो माँगना पड़ता है।”²⁸ In a manner of speaking, her words echo the sentiment: “What choice do you have when nothing else remains?”

All of this, therefore, compels us to see health not just as a medical issue but as a deeply social and structural concern. The collapse of systems of care, both formal and informal, turns an individual’s sickness into a collective failure. It is not only the body that breaks down, but also trust, security, belonging, and sadly, the soul itself. In this light, the 106 cases are not merely about health, they are about a broader breakdown of protection, compassion, and the right to live with dignity.

²⁶ During our interviewing process, we encountered several individuals who appeared to be experiencing mental health issues or symptoms consistent with mental illness. It is important to clarify that only our team’s counsellor is trained in clinical counselling, who is qualified to make clinical assessments or diagnoses, as and when required. However, having spent an extended period working in the Beggars’ Home in Chembur, Mumbai, a space where we encountered a large number of individuals with visible signs of mental health problems, our team, with this experience, developed a degree of familiarity with visible signs of mental illness. While we do not claim clinical authority, prolonged engagement and attentive listening during conversations sensitised us to certain behavioural patterns, disruptions in speech, emotional volatility, and signs of disorientation. These observations led us to believe, with due caution, that some of the individuals we met may have been living with mental health conditions that remain undiagnosed or untreated. While our impressions are not clinical conclusions, we include them here because such encounters were significant to our understanding of the lived experiences of people in begging and destitution. Acknowledging these impressions, even tentatively, is important; not to assign labels, but to underline the visible links between mental health challenges, social neglect, and urban marginality.

²⁷ Chitra was abandoned by her first husband, with whom she had three children. When he left, he took all three children with him, leaving her to cope with both emotional and material loss.

²⁸ One of my arms and one leg are paralysed. I can’t work, and no one gives me any work either. This is my second marriage. My husband also has disability, and he too begs. My situation is very bad. I don’t prostitute myself or steal. I only beg. Is that wrong? I have three children, and I have to beg for them.

Treated as a Burden: Dependency, Stigma and Shame

Sixty-four people said they were treated as a burden, either by family members or by their communities. This perception of being 'extra,' 'burden' or 'useless' is socially constructed. It emerges when a person is no longer able to contribute economically or fit into predefined social roles. Widows, people with disabilities, the elderly, and those with chronic illnesses are often told, sometimes cruelly, sometimes subtly, that they are eating someone else's food, using up someone else's space and resources.

Being made to feel like a burden creates a slow erosion of self-worth. Several individuals described a sense of shame so deep that they left home voluntarily, even when no one had explicitly asked them to go. This internalised rejection is one of the cruellest outcomes of social abandonment. Begging, in such cases, was not just an act of survival but also a form of withdrawal: from family, from community, from society. Just like the way Aamir experienced.

Aamir, in his early sixties, used to do *wadikam*.²⁹ The trauma of the loss of his wife was gnawed at him, emotionally and physically. Then came old age. Pain in the legs, weakness, infirmity. The man who worked hard all his life and earned with dignity, fell prey to time. His own body became a site of struggle for him. He gave up work, and moved with his two sons and their families. He was received without warmth, his presence was more tolerated rather than welcomed. In the house he should have grown old with some comfort, he was made to feel like a like a xenograft, a foreign body among his own kin.

“चालीस साल तक मैंने वाडीकाम करके ज़िन्दगी चलायी, परिवार को पाला। 2013 में मेरी घरवाली गुज़र गयी, जिससे मुझे बहुत दुःख हुआ। फिर भी, किसी तरह मैंने खुद को संभाला और फिर भी काम करता रहा। पिछले दो सालों से मेरे बाएं पैर में बहुत दर्द रहता है। मैं बैसाखी के बिना नहीं चल सकता। क्योंकि एक पैर सहारा नहीं देता, इसलिए दूसरे पैर पर वजन पड़ता है, जिससे दाएं पैर में भी हमेशा दर्द रहता है। किसी तरह, मुझे गुजरात में एक कैटरिंग पार्टी में काम मिल गया जहां मुझे बैठकर ही करने वाला काम दिया गया। इसलिए मैं यह काम कर पाया। ‘सेठ’ अच्छा था। उसने परमिशन दे दी। चार महीने बाद वह काम खत्म हो गया और मैं अपने परिवार के पास वापस आ गया। मेरे दो बेटे हैं, जिनकी शादी हो चुकी है और उनके बच्चे भी हैं। मैंने उन्हें अपनी कमाई के 22,000 रुपये पूरे-पूरे दे दिए। जब तक पैसे रहे, वो लोगों ने मेरे साथ अच्छा व्यवहार किया। उसके बाद, मेरी बहुएँ अपने बच्चों को मारने लगीं और अपने पतियों से झगड़ने लगीं। यह एक इशारा था मेरे लिए। इसलिए मैंने करीब डेढ़ महीने पहले घर छोड़ दिया।”³⁰

In modern urban Indian set-up, this is a necessary consequence of the social design where your work or profession becomes your primary identity. Our society, by its very nature, promote an identity that is inseparable from one's economic function. It does not merely see work as part of who you are; it recasts your entire self in economic terms: you are your CV; you are your LinkedIn profile. You do not simply have a job, you become the

²⁹ Work at catering sites.

³⁰ For forty years I did wadikam and raised my family. In 2013, my wife passed away, which made me very sad. Still, somehow, I managed myself and still kept working. For the last two years, I have been having a lot of pain in my left leg. I cannot walk without crutches. Because one leg is not supporting me, the weight falls on the other leg, which causes constant pain in the right leg as well. Somehow, I got a job in a catering party in Gujarat where I was given a sitting job. So, I was able to do this job. The 'seth' was nice. He gave permission. After four months, the job got over and I returned to my family. I have two sons, who are married and have children. I gave them the entire ₹22,000 I earned. As long as that money lasted, they treated me well. After that, my daughters-in-law started beating their children and quarrelling with their husbands. This was a sign for me. So, I left home about a month and a half ago.

job. This is why the unemployed, disabled, homeless, or elderly are often rendered invisible within modern urban landscape. Simply put, they fall outside the identity framework that we recognise as valid, and hence they do not exist in real terms.

Accidents

Life at the margins is always precarious. 48 people shared about accidents like road mishaps, construction site injuries, and railways accidents that instantly removed them from the world of work. These accidents were not just bodily injuries but economic disasters. Informal workers, street vendors, and daily wage earners have no health insurance, no paid leave, and no recovery support. One injury can mean permanent destitution.

Pravin, now thirty-five, was a hard-working man. He earned his living by selling trinkets in suburban trains, while his wife worked as a domestic help. One day, his life was upended by tragedy when he met with a railway accident while doing his regular work: selling stuff in trains. The injuries were severe, and his right leg had to be amputated below the knee.

The accident not only crippled his body but also shook the foundation of his family's livelihood. Confined to a hospital bed, then to his bedroom for a long time with a slow and painful recovery, Pravin found himself suddenly dependent on others, on crutches, on hope. Without any institutional support, his means of earning vanished overnight. His wife, already burdened with long hours of menial work, now had to bear the additional responsibility of caregiving. The household slipped into despair, and the future began to feel like a closed street. What was once a life marked by struggle with dignity, became a daily negotiation with helplessness. Eventually, when no other viable option remained, Pravin turned to begging reluctantly, with guilt, shame and a heavy heart.

Action by Government Agencies and Municipality

For 34 people, the reason for begging was the direct action of authorities, confiscation of goods or eviction. These individuals were far from begging to begin with. They were hawkers or small-time sellers of stuff like toys, balloons, trinkets, napkins or garbage bags. After the coronavirus pandemic, the police began to prohibit such informal selling activities in areas like the Gateway of India and Colaba. In many cases, police confiscated and burnt their belongings including their selling stuff. In such a condition, when their means of income were taken away, often as special drives for city cleanliness, or anti-encroachment drives, but effectively amounting to police harassment, they were left with nothing. This is a form of state violence. The state, rather than protecting its most vulnerable, becomes a source of fear and dispossession.

Living in Fear, Stripped of Dignity (Fear of Abuse, Fear of Death, Undignified Treatment)

Fear runs through all the stories. 66 people explicitly mentioned a fear of abuse, while 10 people spoke of a fear of death, not in a notional or philosophical sense, but as a daily threat. Many slept in vulnerable public places, feared being attacked or assaulted, or worried about being picked up by the police. For women, the fear often had a gendered dimension of sexual assault, or of being misunderstood about their character. The most heart-breaking figure was this: 112 people said they experienced undignified treatment.

They were kicked, called names, or simply ignored. The city treats the destitute not as humans but as dirt to be removed. Several individuals said that they felt lesser humans, and sometimes even less than animals. Dignity, they felt, was a luxury for others. This rejection of basic dignity is not accidental. It is built into the way cities are planned, the way people look away, the way the poor are blamed for their condition. It is this social cruelty that pushes many into emotional isolation and even mental collapse.

Disease: Self or Family

Close to a quarter of the participants (specifically, 118 individuals) identified disease, either their own or that of a close family member, as the principal reason that compelled them to take to begging. This finding is significant and demands deeper reflection. Illness, particularly in conditions of poverty, is not merely a matter of health; it often becomes the impetus that pushes individuals and families into a sharp economic decline. When public healthcare is so difficult to access, the onset of a serious illness can destroy already fragile livelihoods. For many among the urban poor, even a short-term ailment can mean the loss of daily wages. A prolonged illness, or one that requires hospitalisation or long-term care, often exhausts what little savings a family might have, if any.



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The testimonies gathered in the course of this reporting process suggest that the economic burden of disease intersects with social exclusion. People who were once engaged in low-income but somewhat stable occupations such as street vending, domestic work, or manual labour, find themselves unable to return to work, either due to their own health problems or due to someone's illness in the family. Those without family or community support are left with very few alternatives. Begging, in such circumstances, is not a freely chosen path but a desperate response to an unforgiving crisis. Moreover, the data draws attention to a larger picture. It underlines the critical absence of safety nets for those dealing with health emergencies, especially for the urban marginalised who are uninsured and unprotected against such sudden problems. The relationship between health

³¹ The woman in the photograph is begging because her son suffers from epilepsy, and she does not have enough money for his treatment. While our teammate Aaliya was talking to her, the boy had an epileptic attack. Aaliya is a trained clinical counsellor, and she said the seizure was real. It should be noted that the woman is not using her child as an exhibit to get pity. She brought him with her because there is no one at home to take care of him.

and destitution is thus circular and self-reinforcing: poverty breeds ill-health, and ill-health, in turn, exacerbates poverty, often culminating in the erasure of dignity and autonomy that is a necessary part of begging. This pattern illustrates how the consequences of disease are not limited to the body alone. They protrude outward and devastate households, break social bonds, and push individuals further and farther into the social margins, where begging becomes not merely an act of survival but an indicator of quality of public health and welfare systems.

Begging as a Customary Practice

During this process, we came across six people who practised begging as a customary obligation. Of these six individuals, only one was a woman; the rest were men. Three of the men were carrying whips and wearing *ghungroos*. They self-flagellated to cleanse others of their sins when paid to do so. These men begged not only due to poverty but also because of their circumstances; circumstances propelled by their culture and customs.

They were educated, but their cultural norms required them to beg in order to remain part of their community and to be considered eligible for marriage. In this context, begging is neither an economic compulsion nor devoid of dignity. On the contrary, these men are respected.

Yet, despite this respect and social acceptance, they remain victims of their circumstances. If they do not beg, they risk being excluded from the possibility of marriage and face the threat of becoming outcasts within their society.

It must also be noted that the money they earn through begging is not theirs to keep. They are required to deposit it with the Mahalakshmi Temple Trust in their native place, a significant portion of which is used to cover the expenses of the annual Mahalakshmi Puja.

Conclusion

One of the key insights that emerges from this theme is the huge and troubling gap between perception and reality. The dominant perception paints individuals in beggary as tricksters, individuals who fake illness, disability, or destitution to make a quick money. This view, which remains widespread and often unquestioned, is not merely incorrect, but is dangerous. It distorts public understanding, blinds society from real suffering, and engenders policies that punish rather than support. It enables a system that criminalises those who are already on the outer edge of the society, reinforcing cycles of exclusion instead of addressing the conditions that give rise to such vulnerability.

In truth, begging is rarely a choice, and to think that it is made lightly or opportunistically is egregious. It is a last resort, turned to by those who have been abandoned, broken, injured, or humiliated; people robbed of work, kinship, and the fragile safety mechanisms of everyday life. These individuals are in no way manipulating the society or the system; they themselves are, in fact, casualties of the system and the society, most of them gaslit by the dominant discourse that what they suffer is their own doing, and that what they do in the face of their hardships is still a social and legal crime. But in fact, their very presence on the streets is evidence not of their failure, but of ours.

Even in contexts where begging may seem to have customary or traditional roots, such practices are deeply embedded in histories of marginalisation. The real triggers behind begging are not laziness or moral failure. They are abandonment, chronic illness, disability, accidents, mental state, and social rejection. The narratives behind the numbers expose not only individual fragility but institutional indifference. To criminalise such people is not only unjust; it is inhumane. A truly humane response requires more than token gestures. It demands that we listen not only to the voices, but also to the silences. It asks that we reorient our policies, replacing suspicion with solidarity and charity with justice.

It is not enough to pity or to offer spare change; what is needed is larger transformations in our attitudes and the broader system. These are not people in search of sympathy. They require recognition, inclusion, justice, and the dignity of being acknowledged as complete human beings, with needs, rights, and pasts. These lives remind us of how quickly individuals are discarded once they no longer 'fit in'. Their existence on the margins compels us to rethink not only our policies but our everyday attitudes: how we look, how we speak, how we judge.

The shift we need is from suspicion to compassion, from criminalisation to care, and most urgently, from temporary relief to long-term solutions. The real challenge is not how to remove begging persons from view, but how to build a society where no one is pushed into begging at all. That requires investment in public healthcare, protection of informal livelihoods, accessible and affordable housing, and emotional as well as psychological support systems.

It requires a radical shift in the way we conceptualise poverty, vulnerability, and value of human beings. And until that shift begins, we must keep listening, because every person who has fallen in beggary is not just a person in need but a witness, testifying to the deeper fault lines in our collective life. They tell us something essential about who we are, and who we have failed to be.

THE FUTURE WE WANT FOR OUR CHILDREN

This chapter looks at how people living in poverty and destitution think about the future of their children. During our conversations with them, we asked them a simple question especially: *“What kind of future do you want for your children?”* Many parents spoke of education, a better life, and work with dignity. Some said they had no expectations at all. A few spoke of deep hurt caused by their own children. These replies came from personal experience and from years of hardship and neglect. They help us understand how people in destitution try to make sense of both the present and the future.

A question which on the surface looks so simple is never actually so. It carries the weight of social location, trauma, and economic hope. Within the context of homelessness, begging, and destitution, this question becomes more than aspirational. It becomes a window into how the marginalised imagine time, a break from continuity of their situation, and the possibility of transformation.

Better education	Better quality of life	Dignified job	Good family life	No expectation	Irrelevant	Received mistreatment from children
156	146	74	62	45	104	37

Better Education

The largest number of individuals (156 individuals) expressed a desire for better education for their children. For them, education was not simply about acquiring knowledge. It was seen as a means to improve one’s life, a way to find better work, gain social recognition, and move out of poverty.

Education, in their eyes, held value not only in practical terms but also as a source of dignity and respect which many of them had been denied because of their social and economic background. Many of these individuals have remained trapped in their difficult situations, partly due to lack of education. They have seen how, in wider society, education can transform lives. People from economically struggling families have managed to find stability and acceptance through education. This observation has perhaps shaped their hopes for their own children. Even though they could not escape poverty themselves, they wish for their children to break free from the cycle. For them, education represents far more than schooling. It is imagined as a path out of destitution, a safeguard against the cruelty of poverty, and a way to overcome the inherited burdens of class and circumstance. It offers the possibility of a better life, a life marked by choice, respect, and opportunity. Despite all the challenges they face, the belief in the power of education remains strong. Parents continue to hope, often in the face of great uncertainty, that education will change the course of their children’s lives.

Better Quality of Life

A significant number of individuals engaged in begging report having spent most of their lives in conditions marked by deprivation, insecurity, and suffocation. This suffocation is not only the physical discomfort of street life but also the psychological weight of continuous marginalisation.

Despite repeated efforts to improve their circumstances, most remain trapped in cycles of poverty and exclusion. Begging, far from being a voluntary or preferred choice, subjects them to daily humiliation. People often look away, mock, or actively demean them, reinforcing a sense of social erasure. The absence of basic necessities such as shelter, food security, or protection from arbitrary harassment, makes their quality of life both precarious and humiliating.

While previous sections have detailed the everyday realities of destitution, it is important to highlight that, for many, structural barriers make escape from this condition nearly impossible. It is within this context of enduring suffocation that the desire for a better quality of life emerges as a powerful aspiration.

A total of 146 participants articulated this wish for their children, second only to the want of better education. Although seemingly abstract, when seen through their lived experience, the phrase becomes clear. The ability to sleep off the pavement, eat regularly, and avoid the constant fear of police raids or municipal actions. They have a longing for stability, for a secure physical space, even something as minimal and ordinary as a lockable room to sleep peacefully at night. Crucially, this vision of a better life is not rooted in fantasies of luxury, but in the hope for ordinary everyday humanly needs. The emotional weight behind these aspirations becomes clearer when placed against the backdrop of intergenerational hope.

For many, particularly those who had children, the desire for upward mobility was not self-directed but projected forward to the next generation. Of the 146 who explicitly mentioned this, the majority wished that their children break free from the suffocating conditions they themselves could not escape. For those without children was a hope for some minimal shift in the terms of their existence. In essence, the “better life” being sought is fundamentally about escaping the everyday violence that defines life on the margins. It is about reclaiming control over space, time, and body. It is about moving from mere survival to the possibility of being recognised as a full participant in society.

Dignified Job

Seventy-four participants specifically mentioned that they hoped their children would have dignified employment. There is an important distinction here: not merely employment, but employment that is dignified. This reflects the desire not just for economic survival but for social respectability. It shows the intense desire not just for financial improvement, but for social upliftment. The imagination of a job is not linked only to wages, but also to honour and respect, which the current modes of survival like begging, rag-picking, selling odd stuff fail to bring. This is especially evident when we look at how informal labour is treated in urban spaces. Despite doing the most essential works of human existence, the poor are denied respect.

Hence, the participants' dream for their children is a job where they are not looked down upon; jobs such as those often imagined as office work or government services of official nature.

From Good Family Life to No Expectation

Over the past two decades of involvement in the field, the team has met countless individuals whose lives have been devastated by broken families, difficult relationships, and abandonment. Life on the streets is harsh and unforgiving, and it often leaves people emotionally wounded and isolated.

In this context, it is telling that 62 individuals we spoke to said that what they most wished for their children was a "good family life." This simple phrase carries deep meaning. It reflects not just a desire for family, but for something they themselves had often lost: emotional safety, support, and the feeling of being cared for. These individuals had gone through experiences such as domestic violence, neglect, and the breakdown of family ties. They were not necessarily talking about the picture of a perfect family, but rather about having close and caring bonds, where one is not hurt by their own loved ones and is not left alone in times of need.

These are basic, yet deeply human hopes, shaped by personal suffering. What they call a "good family life" is essentially a dream of emotional security, a space where one is wanted, respected, and not harmed. This longing also points to a larger fact: when poverty becomes extreme and survival itself is a struggle, relationships too begin to take the weight. The constant pressure of daily life like finding food, shelter, or safety often weakens the very bonds that are supposed to provide comfort. In this way, poverty does not only damage physical health or limit opportunities; it also harms the emotional and relational tissue of people's lives. In saying that they want a "good family life" for their children, these individuals are expressing a quiet but strong hope that the next generation may grow up in a world where love is not a luxury, and where family is a source of strength rather than pain.

Equally important and perhaps more troubling insight came from the 45 individuals who told us that they had "no expectations" from or for their children. This is not a sign of indifference, but something much more troubling. It reflects a state of giving up, a quiet surrender to the belief that the future is no longer theirs to imagine or hope for. This loss of expectation, in many ways, reveals the emotional aftermath of being repeatedly let down, not just by life or circumstances, but also by the state's long-standing neglect and society's long-standing indifference.

When the systems and institutions which is meant to protect and support you remain absent or indifferent, not to say turn hostile against you, it becomes increasingly difficult to believe that anything good can be hoped for. In such a context, the refusal to expect is also a way of protecting oneself. It becomes a strategy of emotional survival because, by expecting nothing, one avoids the pain of shattered hopes. Some participants spoke of children turned indifferent or even unkind towards them. Others simply feared that expecting anything would only bring more grief. What we witness here is not just despair, but what might be called a loss of the notion of the future: the inability to believe in the possibility of a better tomorrow.

This is where one sees the full brutality of destitution, not just in the body but also in the imagination. A person who has been snatched of the ability to imagine the future has been dispossessed of one of their most humanly possessions. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben speak of “bare life”³²: life that is biologically alive but socially and politically dead or abandoned. This is the kind of life where dreams no longer find space. Yet, even in this refusal, there remains a faint echo of earlier desires. The very act of saying “no expectations” hints at a time when expectations existed. What we hear, then, is not silence, but the memory of a voice that once dared to dream.



This sense of emotional and relational loss also explains why 62 other participants expressed a profound wish that their children have a “good family life.” In the harsh world of street life marked by broken families, abuse, and abandonment, this aspiration is important. It is not necessarily a longing for the idealised family, but for something more fundamental: safety, care, and companionship. Many of the individuals we met had lived through domestic violence, neglect, or the collapse of familial bonds. In dreaming of a good family life for their children, they were really dreaming of love, of being seen and not harmed by those closest to them. These are small hopes yet very human. They reveal how emotional security becomes a rare and precious aspiration in the lives of those denied even the basics.

Moreover, this desire tells us something about the impact of poverty on relationships. When day-to-day survival becomes a struggle, the pressures can tear apart even the closest bonds. Poverty, then, is not only an economic condition, it is a condition that erodes

³² Giorgio Agamben’s concept of bare life originates from his influential work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995). In this work, Agamben explores how modern sovereign power operates not simply through laws or institutions, but through its ability to decide who is included within the political community and who is excluded. Bare life refers to a condition in which a person is biologically alive but stripped of political and legal recognition, and reduced to mere existence without rights, dignity, or meaningful protection. Such individuals live in a state of exclusion; though under the control of power yet without its protections. Examples include refugees, the stateless, detainees in camps, or, in our context, the homeless and the destitute whose lives are visible but socially abandoned. At Sam-Haq Trust, we use the expression ‘THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE’ for this state of existence.

trust, care, and emotional safety. In such a world, wishing for a “good family life” becomes a powerful expression of what is missing.

Put together, these voices of those who no longer expect, and those who still dare to hope, draw a painful yet profound picture. They show us how abandonment, by family, by community, by the state, by society, fractures the emotional lives of the poor. And yet, amidst all this, we also hear the fragile possibility of dreams that have not completely died.

Irrelevant

For 104 participants, the question regarding the future of their children did not arise. In some instances, this was because they had never married, or remained childless despite marriage. In others, their social and gender identities, such as belonging to the *hijra* community, situated them outside the conventional framework of heteronormative family life, therefore, rendering the questions about offspring and their future as irrelevant.

Mistreatment from Children

Thirty-seven participants said that they had been mistreated by their own children. Some had been driven out of their homes; others were denied food or care; still others were there who just felt that the human connection was missing. These were stories full of tears, misunderstandings, neglect and shame. We came across men and women who were expelled from the very houses that they built with their hard-earned money. Mohammad Saleem suffers from asthma. He did not receive any support from his children for its treatment. Instead, he was expelled from his own house.

बच्चों को पढ़ाया-लिखाया। उनकी शादी करके दी। आज वही लोग मुझे पूछते नहीं हैं। मुझे मेरे ही घर से निकाल दिया³³

Sayema (80 years) has a similar story.

मेरे आदमी को खत्म हुए चालीस साल हो गए। मेरा एक बेटा है, बहू है, पोता-पोती है। पर कोई नहीं देखता है। उन्हें पाल-पोस कर बड़ा किया, आज कोई मुझे नहीं संभालता है। मेरा नागपाड़ा में घर था। उसे मेरे लड़के ने बेच दिया। मैं माहिम डिपो के पास भाड़े से रहती थी। भाड़ा नहीं भर पायी, निकाल दिया मालिक ने। डेढ़ महीने से रोड पर रह रही हूँ। [यह दुकान] दो बजे बंद होती है। यहीं सोती हूँ। कोई बात करने वाला नहीं है। कोई नहीं पूछता। उस [अपने बेटे] के लिए शादी नहीं की। अपनी जवानी खत्म कर दी। आज वह मुझे पांच रूपया नहीं देता।³⁴

This is not just betrayal, it is the disintegration of the morality of kinship. The sacred and tacit pact between parent and child, built on care and sacrifice, breaks down. The carer becoming the discarded in their old age is cruel. Yet, this too must be read in context. These betrayals do not emerge in a vacuum. They are shaped by unemployment, rising

³³ I got my children educated. Got them married. Today those same people don't even care about me. They threw me out of my own house.

³⁴ It's been forty years since my husband died. I have a son, a daughter-in-law, grandchildren. But no one looks after me. I brought them up, but today no one takes care of me. I had a house in Nagpada. My son sold it. I used to live on rent near Mahim Depot. I could not pay the rent, and the owner threw me out. I have been living on the road for one and a half months. [This shop] closes at two o'clock. I sleep here. There is no one to talk to me. No one to bother about me. I did not marry for him [my son]. I wasted my youth. Today he does not give me even five rupees.

costs, housing shortages, and cultural shifts. But for the person experiencing it, these explanations are of no solace; neither can they ever be.

Emotional Homelessness: Being without Belonging

The urban poor are not a homogenous group. They are individuals with complex emotional experiences, shaped by pasts of marginalisation, urban alienation, and relational rupture. Their dreams are as much personal as they are political. They desire education because they see it as a key to social inclusion. They want dignity in work because they know the shame of being seen as lesser beings. They long for love in family life because they know what it means to be rejected. And yet, many give up expecting anything. Some because it is too painful to hope. Others because they can no longer see themselves as part of the collective called humanity. Hope among such disadvantaged individuals is not always smiling and twinkling. It is fragile and often weary and wounded.



For the destitute, future aspiration is both a burden and a balm. It allows them to imagine otherwise, even if that imagining remains out of reach. The answers to the question *“What kind of future do you want for your children?”* show that they do not lack vision. They lack the conditions for their vision to materialise. Their responses tell us something profound about the human condition. Even in lives marred by suffering, the future persists as a question and a hope. But when this question becomes irrelevant, we must pause. It signals that something more than economic poverty is at play. It signals a poverty of the inner self, a dispossession from the narrative of future, and of progress.

We often fail to notice even physical homelessness, which is right in front of our eyes, out in the open. But there is a quieter, more hidden kind of homelessness that remains unnoticed and remains outside the reach of our imagination. At Sam-Haq Trust, we call it emotional homelessness. A person may have a house, a source of income, family members, and a few friends, and yet still feel lost, disconnected, lonely and unseen.

Emotional homelessness refers to this silent and painful state of inner aloneness and desertion, when a person does not feel at home in their own life, in their relationships, or even within themselves. Unlike physical homelessness, which refers to the lack of shelter or housing, emotional homelessness is about the absence of human bonding. One might be surrounded by family and yet feel deeply alone. Their happiness goes unnoticed, and their sorrows remain unsupported. In the noise of daily life, their voice is neither heard nor missed.

Let us imagine a common household scene. An elderly mother who had once cared for everyone: her husband, her children, and her home, is now living with her son. Her husband has passed away. Her daughters are married and living elsewhere. Her son, now a working man, lives with her, his wife and children. During the day, he goes to work; in the evening, he returns and spends time with his immediate family. The mother's basic needs are taken care of. She is fed, clothed, and has a roof over her head. Yet she feels a vacuum. There is no one to share her thoughts, her stories, or her memories. There is no one to sit with her and talk about things that may not seem useful, but are, in fact, meaningful and important. Her feelings are kept locked inside her, and slowly, she begins to feel like a guest in her own home.

There is no villain in this story. Everyone is busy, everyone is doing what they can. But this is what emotional homelessness looks like. It hides in plain sight, in neat homes with clean kitchens and stocked fridges. It is not always marked by cruelty, but often by absence. Absence of time, absence of listening, and absence of presence.

One day, perhaps during a casual conversation, the son or daughter-in-law may say something that reminds the old woman of a time when she felt truly needed, truly alive. That small remark, however unintentional, may bring back a flood of memories. And suddenly, something breaks within her. Not loudly. But like a silent crack across glass; barely visible, yet permanent.

Emotional homelessness does not only affect the elderly. It may be found in someone younger as well. It may even live in someone who is always surrounded by people but feels invisible in every crowd. At its heart, emotional homelessness is the condition of not belonging, of not being seen, heard, or valued for who one actually is. It can arise from neglect, silence, broken relationships, or even from the relentless busyness of life. It means, therefore, that belonging is not just about where we live or who we live with, it is about connection, warmth, and being remembered and missed.

Ultimately, the need to belong is not a luxury, it is essential. Just as food and shelter are basic human needs, so too is the need to be loved, to be spoken to with care, and to be held in someone's mind with fondness.

Emotional homelessness, then, lies beyond the reach of established systems for diagnosing and classifying mental health conditions. Let us take one more example. And this one is not an imagined illustration; it is as real as it gets. It is also important to emphasise that although we did not come across this person during the interviewing process for this report, and therefore, have not used his case in the analysis, his mention here is significant to help elucidate the concept of emotional homelessness.

While Mohd Tarique was still in the early phase of his work around homelessness and destitution, he came across a man in the Beggars' Home at Chembur whose repeated interactions with him became the catalyst for what would later evolve into the idea of emotional homelessness. For the sake of convenience, let us call this man Samir.

Samir and his three younger brothers were orphaned when he was in his mid-teens. At an age when he himself was still growing, and was still vulnerable, he found himself in the role of a parent. His brothers were even younger, one of them not yet ten years of age, and it fell upon Samir to care for them, to shield them from the uncertainties of future that orphanhood brings.

To sustain the family, he got training in horizontal directional drilling (HDD), a specialised work that demands not only physical labour but also technical expertise. The work involves handling intricate machinery, navigating subterranean pathways, and controlling the flow of drilling fluids. All of these require considerable skill. The job was demanding but well-paying, and it allowed Samir to provide for his brothers. But just enough to keep things going. Because everything he earned, every drop of his blood and sweat, he poured into their upbringing.

Because he sacrificed his all for their future, they were able to stand on their feet. He worked really hard for their comfort. He never wore new clothes, using only the ones his brothers no more needed, even though it was he who earned, not them. He gave them new uniforms so that no one in the school mocked at them. He toiled and suffered. He never married, thinking it might divert his time, money, and emotional energy away from their education, progress, and well-being. In a society where men are often judged by their household and heirs, Samir put on stake his entire identity on the success of his siblings. He turned into a living example of self-abnegation.

In the fullness of time, his struggles bore fruit. They all became educated and successful, at least in the conventional sense. One of them got a government job with the Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport as a bus driver. His second brother became an MBBS doctor. And the youngest one also settled well economically.

Since Samir had spent more time with his youngest brother, he started living with him and his family. He was treated well. All his needs were taken care of. His brother loved him and took proper care of him. He was given the same food as everyone else in the household ate. He was given comfortable clothes. There was nothing that we could call a vulnerability. There was nothing that we could call a rift. All seemed well. Until the night he happened to overhear a casual remark. His brother, speaking casually to his wife, said, "What has *bhaiya* achieved in life?" Perhaps it was meant as an innocuous observation, said in passing without any malice. Perhaps it echoed the calculus of success valued by the dominant discourse: degrees, possessions, visible material and economic progress.

But for Samir, it was a loaded sentence that shattered him. In that single sentence, his whole life shrunk and flashed before him. It was as if his whole life replayed itself in front of him: his sacrifices, his silent compromises, the years of effort so that others could grow. And then, a thought silently crept in his head, “Do I really belong here, or am I only accommodated?” This thought was extremely overpowering.

That night, he left home.

When he met Tarique, he must have been about fifty-five years of age. He still did the work of HDD for eleven months of the year. And in the twelfth month, he would go to Shirdi and donate all his savings there. It was during one such stay in Shirdi that he was arrested under the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959, and got detained in the Chembur Beggars’ Home for one year.

To some, his brother’s remark might appear trivial, undeserving of such consequence. It did not mock or dismiss him outright. But words are not equal in meaning to all who hear them. The remark, even if casual, echoed society’s dominant lens that often values visibility over sacrifice, outcomes over processes, assets over emotions. For Samir, it hit at something deep inside him: his silent, lifelong devotion to a family that perhaps no longer needed him in true sense. And the result was physical homelessness; not for want of food or shelter, but for want of belonging.

We cannot blame his brother. Nor can we blame Samir. But it happened. And there is no easy explanation for why. We cannot call his brother heartless, in fact he was caring. Nor can we call Samir as irrational. What happened lies outside the easy realm of right and wrong. It belongs instead to the fragile domain of emotional homelessness, which as we have stated above, is not the absence of shelter or meals. It is when a person is fed, clothed, and included in all the rituals of domestic life, but never truly heard. He is informed of every decision, but never invited to participate in any. His presence is acknowledged, but his significance is not. He is told that he is loved, but he is never made to feel an essential and integral part of the family. Samir had a home. But one day, he realised he had no place.

Processing his experience, Tarique could see a vacuum that was emotion, rather than physical, where rootlessness was not in the structure of any kind, but in Samir’s heart. And therefore, he termed it as ‘EMOTIONAL HOMELESSNESS.’

I WANT YOU TO KNOW

The last question in our conversation was “कोई और भी ऐसी बात बताइये जो आप चाहते हैं कि समाज और सरकार आपके बारे में जाने”³⁵ This is a question which we posed to create space for actual listening rather than generating data. Its primary intention was to offer participants a rare opportunity to speak on their own terms, to share whatever they wished, whatever they could imagine, whatever they felt that needed to be said.

It was rare indeed, as many participants told us that no one had ever bothered to ask them questions like these. In fact, they shared that no one had even taken the time to speak with them at all, let alone inquire about their lives or conditions. Some of them even wept just because we sat beside them and asked if they were doing all right.

In asking this question, we acknowledged their subjectivity and affirmed that their thoughts, emotions, opinions and insights matter. It allowed them to express their voice, not as passive subjects of suffering, but as individuals with something to say; with perspectives that deserve to be heard. It offered them the dignity of being asked not merely what they have endured, but what they wish the world to understand about them. In this way, this question positions the participant not merely as a source of information but as a social actor with perspectives worth listening to. It created a space where people who are usually ignored were finally heard. Not with pity, but with care and respect. Through this question, we were able to assure them that their voices matter.

The responses, when thematically analysed, reveal patterns of desire, struggle, and social as well as governmental critique. They include calls for recognition, frustrations with social prejudices, and appeals for basic dignity and inclusion. But it is a sad reality that the maximum number of answers came in the form of no expectations, neither from the society, nor from the government.

Need for respect	Need to feel included	Acknowledgement of existence	Equal treatment	No expectations	No interference from authorities
58	149	64	32	216	24

Fundamental Need for Respect and Inclusion

As human beings, we live together in groups, families, and communities. We are not isolated individuals; we are connected to one another and depend on each other in many ways. These human connections form a network of relationships. For this network to work well and help us all grow, it is important that no one is left out. Everyone must feel included, valued, and respected.

Social inclusion is not only important for each person's personal growth, but it is also necessary for building a healthier and stronger society. When people feel accepted and respected, they contribute positively to their communities. Just as food is essential for

³⁵ Tell us anything else that you want the society and the government to know about you.

the body, respect and dignity are essential for the soul. They are not luxuries, but among the most basic and vital human needs.



However, in many societies, including ours, people have been treated differently based on the kind of work they do or the roles they play in society. For example, those who do mental or ‘clean’ work are often respected more than those who do physical or ‘dirty’ work. This way of thinking, which judges a person by their job, has contributed to the creation of a hierarchy. Some people are seen as more important than others, simply because of the kind of work they do. This has led to unfair treatment and exclusion of many.

As a result, there are groups of people who are pushed outside the social boundaries of respect and dignity. People living on the streets, those who are extremely poor, and in difficult situations are often looked down upon or ignored. They are not treated in the same dignified manner as others. Whether we realise it or not, we as a society have excluded them. We have failed to give them the dignity and respect that every person deserves.

It is important here to understand the difference between respect and dignity. Dignity is something that every person has, simply by being human. It means recognising the worth of a person, no matter what they do or how they live. Respect, on the other hand, often depends on how someone is seen or judged by others. It can be given or taken away. But dignity, which is inherent to a person’s being, must never be denied.

In our conversations, when people were asked what they wished society and the government must understand about them, many spoke of a deep desire to be included and

treated with respect. A total of 149 people spoke about the *need to feel included*, and 58 people mentioned the *need for respect*. These are not small numbers. They reflect a longing that is widespread and painful.

Mohini, a young transgender person of 27, shared her thoughts in a simple but deeply moving way. She said:

हम भी इंसान हैं, हमको भी जीने दो। मुझे भी मन करता है मैं भी घूमूँ, अच्छे से रहूँ, जो आम लोग करते हैं वो करूँ। पर हम कर नहीं पाते हैं।³⁶

Mohini belongs to the hijra community, which faces many forms of discrimination. People with transgender identities are often denied employment, refused opportunities, and treated as less than others. They are not given the same respect that is given to others, and their basic rights are often overlooked. Moreover, they are harassed and mocked for the person they are.

But it is important to recognise that this is not the experience of transgender individuals alone. The longing for inclusion, dignity, and respect was echoed by many people across different identities and backgrounds. The numbers mentioned above show that this is a shared feeling; an experience that crosses lines of gender, age, and circumstances.

Mohini's words, however, remind us that inclusion, respect, and dignity are not only ideas, these are needs that matter and that make a real difference in the lives of people. Without this, societies remain unjust. If we are to build a truly fair and compassionate society, we must begin by listening to voices like hers which, although unheard, carry the weight of lived truth. These individuals, though full citizens of India, having all the constitutional and legal rights that citizenship entails, remain marginal, and are yet to be integrated to what is usually termed the 'mainstream' society. They are yet to be acknowledged as legitimate participant in the society. How long can we ignore the contradiction between our constitutional promises and the lived realities of those we exclude?

Acknowledgement of Existence

In the edifice of human dignity, the first brick is laid with recognition. Not reward, not status, not sympathy, but simple recognition. A simple acknowledgement that you are here, I see you, you exist, you matter. For the sixty-four individuals among the participants who named this need explicitly, and for many more who hinted at it obliquely, the pain was not for material relief alone, but for something far more basic: the desire to be acknowledged as existing.

What does it mean to be invisible in plain sight?

Some participants said that in the state of destitution, they felt like wearing Harry Potter's invisibility cloak. People passed by them without looking. It was as if they were not even there. But it does not stop there. Sometimes, something worse happens. A person is sitting on the pavement, seeking for alms. And someone walks by and spits nearby, without noticing, or without caring. Then they walk away, as if nothing happened.

³⁶ We are also human, let us live as well. I too feel like going out, living well, doing the things that common people do. But we are not able to do such things.

This act, which may seem small, and to some, even harmless, carries a heavy meaning. In fact two.

First, it may show complete unawareness of the spitter. The person who spat may not have even noticed that a human being was sitting very close to where they spat. A real person. Just like them. Breathing the same air. Living a life with thoughts, hopes, despair and pain. The spit falls near them, as if they are not worthy of being and existing.

Second, it may show something even worse. It may come from a place of contempt. It is not just forgetting that someone is there. It is treating them as less than human. Spitting not by mistake, but with a certain disgust. As if the one who is begging is a dirty object. As if they do not fully belong to *Homo sapiens*. This is not just absence of acknowledgement. It is rejection. Denial. Talking to us, Aamir pointed at the motorbikes parked around him and said, “ये बाइक वाले आते हैं, झिड़क के बात करते हैं। आस-पास थूक के चले जाते हैं।”³⁷ There was pain in his voice, but also a kind of confusion, as though he himself had begun to internalise the erasure; as though, in the absence of acknowledgement, even his own body’s presence was up for question.

When society ignores you again and again, you begin to doubt yourself. You begin to wonder: am I even here? Do I matter? These are not just acts of neglect. They are acts of erasure. Bit by bit, they wipe away a person’s place in the world. And that is something no one should have to bear.

This condition is more than marginalisation. It is a kind of social invisibility. One does not need to be actively harmed to be deeply wounded. To be treated as though one does not exist is its own kind of violence, the kind that leaves no mark and yet corrodes one’s sense of self. Humiliation and indifference both are dehumanising, but the latter does so silently, efficiently, and slowly over time.

For people in homelessness and begging, this erasure comes out at multiple levels. It begins at the level of the street, where people avert their eyes, where children are pulled away by anxious parents, where requests meet silences and ignorance. But it continues deeper, into the bureaucracies that deny them ration cards, the hospitals that ignore their presence, the electoral rolls that forget their names. In these silences, the state reflects the street. What society avoids seeing, institutions avoid recording. And so, slowly, lives keep vanishing. Just disappearing. Just ceasing. Just becoming nothing.

And what is the answer? Nobody is demanding the moon. Just simple dignity, and plain acknowledgement of existence. It is strange even to think that a group of people does not exist in anyone’s world.

The absence of recognition has long been the key to the understanding of exclusion. To acknowledge someone is to offer them a meaningful place.

So what does it mean when a society, which is rich in constitutional guarantees and takes pride in its democratic rituals, still fails to acknowledge the very existence of its most vulnerable citizens?

³⁷ These bikers come, speak rough, spit nearby, and leave.

The question of acknowledgement is not abstract. It is not a matter of courtesy. It is the beginning of justice and fairness. It is the precursor to any debate on inclusion, support, or rights. Before we speak of integrating people into society, we must first ask: have we even allowed them to exist within our imagination?

Demand for Equal Treatment

Among the many voices we heard, thirty-two participants spoke explicitly of their desire for *equal treatment*. On the face of it, this might appear to be less visible than appeals for housing, employment, or welfare. But its apparent simplicity is deceptive. To ask for equal treatment means to ask for a place in the very foundation upon which a fair society stands. It is to ask that one's humanity be considered without prejudice or condition.

What does it mean to be treated equally?

In its simplest form, equal treatment means that one's rights, dignity, and aspirations are measured by the same yardstick as anyone else's. It means standing in the same queues and being served at the same counters without being looked at with suspicion. It means not being spoken to in a different tone just because you look different, or because your clothes are torn, or because you happen to be sitting on a pavement instead of inside an office.

For many of our participants, the denial of equal treatment came in everyday forms: being made to sit far from the doctor at hospitals and clinics, being talked to in rough tones at shops, being called names, being shooed away, or being driven away again and again, proscribed from selling what they want to sell, being the last ones to receive help if somehow they received any.

To demand equal treatment, then, is to challenge a deep hierarchy, a hierarchy that distributes dignity selectively, that extends empathy based on appearances, that accords protection depending on one's address, attire, or vocabulary and language.

What these individuals sought was a society in which help is not an act of kindness but a matter of justice; where services are not gifts but entitlements; where all are treated according to the same measure, without class, caste, language or region being a base for their treatment.

It is worth remembering that the Indian Constitution enshrines the principle of equality as one of its cornerstones. But laws and statutes are only as meaningful as their everyday interaction with the everyday person. If a person is denied a bed in a public hospital because of their poverty, if police refuse to register a complaint by a woman whom they consider as wanton because she is homeless, the spirit of Article 14³⁸ is betrayed not in the courtroom but in the hospital building and in the police station.

Equal treatment is not only a demand from the state, but also from society. It asks each of us: do we carry the values of equality in our everyday lives? Do we practise them not

³⁸ The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India. (Article 14, Constitution of India)

only in thought, but in speech and action? When thirty-two people ask to be treated equally, it is not just a numerical data, it is a demand for moral re-evaluation. It is a reminder that a society cannot be fair merely by declaring itself so. It must earn that name through its habits, through its institutions, and above all, through how it treats its most vulnerable members, not on some odd occasions, but always.

Request for No Interference from Authorities

For individuals experiencing homelessness and extreme destitution, interactions with state authorities, particularly the municipal corporation and the police, are seldom neutral, let alone enabling. These encounters are often marked by suspicion, hostility, and punitive action. Rather than being approached as citizens in need of support, they are frequently treated as obstructions in the urban landscape, as disruptions to the imagined order of the city.

Several participants in the vicinity of the Gateway of India recounted how, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdown, the police began preventing them from engaging in small-scale informal vending, selling balloons, trinkets, garbage bags, and other inexpensive items that had previously made possible for them to have a modest means of subsistence. This shift brought about a kind of exclusion, as the bare minimum of livelihoods that they had found for themselves were now rendered unlawful.

Across various parts of Mumbai, others shared troubling details of evictions and the destruction of their few possessions. It is not uncommon for the authorities to confiscate and even burn their meagre belongings, pushing them further into precarity. These acts of dispossession underscore a punitive approach rather than a rehabilitative one.

Twenty-four participants expressed a kind of appeal: if the state cannot help us, it should at least not harm us either. Their demand was not for huge reforms or large-scale welfare schemes, but simply for non-interference. for the space to exist without constant humiliation. They asked, effectively, to be left alone, to be allowed to live their difficult lives without being made more vulnerable by the very institutions that are supposed to protect citizens.

Death of Expectations

The group experiencing destitution has been so vehemently degraded, dehumanised, and denied their rights that their expectations from the society as well as the government have withered and died. But this should not be seen as a passive process. It is an active execution of their hopes, aspirations and expectations by the insensitivities of fellow citizens and the human faces of the state and its institutions.

For a human being to cease expecting anything from those structures that are ostensibly designed to protect, serve, and include them, is not simply a matter of not-mattering, it is like the final nail of disillusionment in a long and continuous coffin of disappointments. “No expectation”, arising from 216 individuals (amounting to a huge 42.86%) from our conversations, does not merely indicate an emotional state, it hints at the end of our social contract that was never respected, always breached.



People in destitution have not been naturally disappointed in society or cynical about the government; rather, they have been systematically pushed to a place where they cannot even so much as expect. We expect something only from someone whom we call our own, who we feel would respond. And therefore, expectation carries the possibility of being let down, and of betrayal. Through cycles of neglect, dispossession, criminalisation, and harassment, the state and society have proven to the destitute, again and again, that they are not simply forgotten, they are undesirable. It seems as if they have been awarded a life-term to live without shelter or security with no foreseeable end or solution. A sentence pronounced not by a judge, but by the indifference of us.

When Amar says, “मैं जिंदा हूँ या मर गया हूँ, समाज और सरकार को कोई फर्क नहीं पड़ता है!”, he is not being metaphorical. He is stating a political reality where his existence has become irrelevant to anyone and everyone. And Devyani’s words, “सरकार की वजह से आज इस हालत में आए हैं। सरकार और समाज से कोई उम्मीद नहीं बची है।” are not spoken in anger but in resignation. This resignation is not ascetic peace, but a surrender brought from non-stop waves of circumstances, swimming against which has badly wearied them.

In the larger scheme of things, such a death of expectations must be read as the crumbling of a nation’s ethical pillars. A society that allows a section of its people to lose all hope in the mechanisms of solidarity and governance is a society that has allowed inequality to turn into normalcy. It hints at a numbness, and that numbness is worrying. After all, the true strength of a democratic society lies not in how it treats its privileged, but how it responds to those who own the least.

The response of “no expectation” warns us that unless expectations are reawakened through justice and through inclusion, we are not living in a shared society, but are divided by a wall on one side of which is comfort and on the other, despair and misery. The silence of those who no longer expect anything should disturb us more than any scream. Because silence is not absence, it is the culmination of too many unheard screams.

CONCLUSION

This report is a critical exploration of the deeply rooted misconceptions surrounding begging, homelessness, and destitution. It broadly speaks of the lived experiences of destitute population in Mumbai and Navi Mumbai. But its larger arguments are valid for many other locations in India. By presenting the lived experiences of 504 individuals, it has offered a nuanced insight into the complexities of their lives, while simultaneously challenging prevailing narratives that perpetuate stigma and exclusion.

Why We Undertook the Process

Despite the visible presence of individuals engaged in begging across urban spaces such as Mumbai and Navi Mumbai, their lives remain largely misunderstood, misrepresented, and neglected in both the corridors of power and in public discourse. The exercise was taken up as a critical necessity: to systematically understand and amplify the voices of these individuals, whose lived realities are shaped by a complex interplay of socio-economic precariousness, emotional vulnerability, and marginalisation. The core idea was to document the lived experiences of people living in destitution in the manner they experienced and expressed.

The absence of nuanced documentation and empathetic engagement with this population has led to policies and public perceptions that are often facile, punitive, or indifferent. We felt a critical need to interrogate not only the immediate conditions under which individuals are forced to beg but also the deeper background that they have gone through. In essence, we wanted to generate actionable insights that can inform more humane and effective interventions by the state and civil society.

The process also involved real-time interventions, such as reuniting a mentally ill woman with her family and providing urgent healthcare to several individuals, acknowledging the urgent human needs that are often buried beneath the category of 'beggar'. Even as this report is being written, the team remains engaged in providing ongoing care and support, signalling that this work is not driven merely by curiosity, academic pursuit, or the interest in observation, but a continuing ethical commitment to those who are routinely excluded.

Recapitulation

In the context of urban India, particularly in Mumbai and Navi Mumbai, begging is frequently perceived as a nuisance and criminalised under an archaic law called the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959. The dominant social discourse often frames begging as an issue of individual moral failing or laziness, ignoring the socio-economic inequalities, systemic neglect, and multiple forms of marginalities that drive individuals into destitution. Rather than addressing these underlying causes through empathetic and inclusive policy-making, state authorities often use strategies of control, exclusion, and institutionalisation. But these are methods that obscure rather than resolve the key issues.

At a societal level, prevailing attitudes toward individuals who beg reflect deep-seated biases and misconceptions. Begging is widely misunderstood as an easy and profitable endeavour, disregarding the harsh realities and emotional toll it inflicts on those who take

recourse to it out of sheer necessity. These misconceptions are perpetuated through consistent sensational media reports highlighting some very rare instances of a 'beggar' being very rich and portraying it as being lucrative. This reinforces damaging stereotypes. Such portrayals obscure the more common and far gloomier reality: individuals who beg endure severe hardships, including emotional humiliation, physical vulnerability, and social isolation.

Further exacerbating the issue is the profound invisibility and neglect faced by homeless individuals. Society's habitual disregard for the homeless and the destitute results in their continuous emotional and psychological degradation. This widespread indifference perpetuates a harmful cycle of marginalisation, where individuals feel increasingly helpless and invisible, their humanity progressively diminished by social and political attitudes.

A critical component of our report also revolves around cleanliness, a societal virtue that starkly highlights the contradictions and inequalities inherent in urban life. While private spaces are maintained meticulously, public spaces remain neglected, disproportionately affecting those who live on the streets. Cleanliness is often inaccessible to homeless individuals due to economic and infrastructural barriers, furthering their marginalisation. Particularly disturbing is the evidence that women deliberately use dirtiness as a protective measure against sexual violence, revealing a severe failure in societal and institutional responsibilities towards basic human dignity and safety. A thing considered as simple is not so if you are a destitute.

We also talked about the emotional pain that people who beg go through every day. Asking strangers for food or money is not easy. It brings shame, fear, and sadness. Many of us feel nervous even when asking close friends for help. But for those who beg, asking has to become a part of the daily routine. They are often ignored, insulted, or treated like they do not exist. The real pain is not just hunger or sickness, but the feeling that no one cares. Every time someone walks past without looking, it hurts their sense of self. Over time, they stop expecting kindness. They become emotionally tired and feel alone. The world around them acts as if they are invisible. We must understand that begging is not just about money. It is about deep emotional suffering caused by society's silence. These people carry a heavy emotional burden that few notice. We must see their pain, not just their poverty, and treat them with the respect every human deserves.

The next theme explains how begging is wrongly seen as a personal failure or a sign of laziness. Many people think that those who beg are doing so out of choice, or even happily. But the real reasons are far more serious and painful. People beg because they have been abandoned, are very ill, mentally distressed, or have no support from family, community or the state. These are not casual choices but desperate last options. The state and society both fail to see these realities. Instead of helping, the state often punishes the poor through harsh laws and maltreatment. Public opinion, shaped by stereotypes, leads to misunderstanding and blame. This view ignores the true suffering of people who beg and supports unfair laws that treat them as criminals rather than as victims of collapsing systems. The report shows that behind every act of begging lies a history of broken families, lost health, mental stress, rejection, and social exclusion.

The fifth theme explored what people who are homeless or engaged in begging want for their children's future. When asked this question, many parents spoke of dreams that they themselves could not achieve. Most of them said they wanted their children to have access to good education, a better life, and work with dignity. Some said they simply wanted their children to have a loving and supportive family life, something they had lost. A few said they had no expectations at all, either because they had been hurt by their children or because they had stopped believing in change. Education was seen as more than just learning. It was viewed as a way to gain respect, escape poverty, and be treated with dignity. The people we spoke to had suffered a great deal, but they still hoped that their children could live better lives which are free from begging, hardship, and social rejection.

There were also voices of pain and hopelessness. Some parents had faced such deep neglect and trauma that they no longer expected anything: neither from their children, nor from the future. This was the result of being let down again and again, children, by family, by society, and by the state. In short, this theme showed that even in deep suffering, people continue to dream, especially for their children. Yet it also reminds us that destitution does not just damage the body; it can also damage the ability to dream of a better tomorrow.

The last theme comes from a question we asked at the end of our conversations: "Is there anything else you want society and the government to know about you?" It was meant to let people speak freely and share what mattered most to them. For many, this was the first time someone had truly asked them how they felt. Their answers showed deep pain, but also wisdom. Many participants said no one had ever spoken to them with respect or interest before. Some even cried, not out of sadness alone, but from the rare and unfamiliar feeling of being seen and heard. They asked for basic respect, to be treated as equals, and simply to be recognised as human beings. Many said that they had no expectations anymore, neither from the society nor from the government, because hoping only led to more disappointment. Some said they wanted no interference from authorities, just to be left alone in peace. People living in destitution are also thinking, feeling human beings. They want to be heard, not pitied. And above all, they want to be treated with dignity.

What It Means

At the heart of this entire exercise is a simple, urgent truth: the lives of those who beg and live in destitution are not shaped by choice, but by structures of abandonment, illness, exclusion, and systemic neglect. The people we met are not looking for pity; they are seeking dignity, recognition, and a fair chance at life. What needs to be said clearly, boldly, and repeatedly is that we as a society have failed to see them, hear them, and stand by them. This report reveals that destitution is not only a material condition but also a deeply emotional and psychological one. It is produced not just by poverty, but by loneliness, loss of identity, fear, and rejection. It is made worse by public silence and state action that punishes rather than protects. When laws treat poverty as a crime, and when institutions turn away the most vulnerable, the result is not social order, but deeper human suffering.

We must stop viewing people who beg as a problem to be removed from sight. Instead, we must begin to understand them as individuals shaped by forces often beyond their control amongst which are violence in the home, loss of health, absence of care, and the disappearance of social safety nets. Their presence on the streets is not a failure of the individual; it is a mirror to the nature of our society.

What needs to be said, therefore, is that change is both possible and necessary. It is not enough to criticise the state; we must also question our own comfort with inequality. When a person dies of hunger on the street, it is not just a policy failure, it is a collective moral failing. As individuals, we often share food when we have extra. However, we must also learn to share even when we do not have surplus; to give in a way that causes us discomfort. We can save someone from dying of hunger, even if we do not have extra food, even if we have just enough for ourselves. We can sacrifice a meal or two to save a life. Going hungry for a meal or two will not kill us; it may cause us some discomfort at the most, and that is precisely when solidarity becomes real.

Lastly, this work calls for reimagining policy, public attitudes, and human relationships. We need welfare, not surveillance; compassion, not control; community, not criminalisation. We need to make space for the marginalised not only in shelters and schemes, but in our imagination of what a just and humane society must be.

Nature of State

The findings of this report show a deeply troubling picture of how the state engages with people who beg or live in homelessness. Rather than offering protection, care, or support, the state often acts as a source of fear, punishment, and exclusion. Laws like the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959 criminalise poverty itself, treating individuals in destitution not as citizens in need, but as public nuisances to be removed from sight. This legal framework reinforces a system where the most vulnerable are penalised simply for existing in public spaces.

The testimonies speak of repeated encounters with state actors, especially police and even municipal authorities, that are marked by harassment, eviction, and confiscation of basic belongings. The destruction of meagre possessions is not just a loss of property; it is an assault on dignity and survival. For many, even minimal means of earning like selling balloons or trinkets were prohibited after the Covid-19 period, leaving them without options.

The state's failure is not just about absence, it is about active harm. Participants shared that when the state does not help, the least it could do is "not do us harm." Yet, for many, this basic hope is unmet. Public institutions that should guarantee dignity and safety instead become spaces of further marginalisation. The act of begging, already difficult and humiliating, is turned into a legal offence, pushing individuals into even deeper despair.

Most devastatingly, this sustained neglect has eroded all trust. A striking 216 participants (nearly 43%) said they have "no expectations" from the state or society. This is not indifference; it is the result of systematic betrayal. People no longer expect justice, inclusion, or even recognition. Their silence is not peace, it is surrender, the final stage of disillusionment.

In many narratives, the state does not appear as a distant bureaucracy, it appears as the face of punishment. Whether it is a policeman burning belongings, a doctor refusing dignified treatment, or a magistrate enforcing a colonial law, the message is the same: you do not belong. This is not just the failure of policy but a rupture of the social contract. This report reminds us that the strength of a democratic state is measured not by how it treats the powerful, but by how it treats those who have the least. When laws are used not to protect the weak but to invisibilise them, when welfare is replaced by surveillance and eviction, and when policies prioritise order over humanity, the state loses its ethical foundation.

In short, the state today acts not as a guardian, but as a gatekeeper, deciding who gets to be visible, who deserves care, and who must remain out of sight. This must change. A just state must listen to those it has silenced, include those it has excluded, and reform laws that have long outlived their role in systems of justice.

Nature of Society

Society's response to homelessness and begging is marked not by hostility alone, but by something deeper, an everyday indifference that erodes the very dignity of those who suffer. The people who beg are not simply ignored; they are erased, rendered invisible in plain sight. Their presence is not just overlooked, it is rejected, sometimes passively, at other times, actively. A society that can walk past men and women begging for food, shelter, or medicine without even a moment of hesitation has internalised exclusion to its core.

The findings show how social perception of those who beg is shaped by deeply harmful stereotypes. People are often seen not as individuals with stories of abandonment, illness, or trauma, but as lazy, cunning, or addicted. This allows society to wash its hands of any responsibility. By blaming the victim, the moral discomfort of confronting structural inequality is avoided. This is why the begging person, rather than being seen as a moral test for the rest of us, becomes merely a nuisance to be removed, a reminder of inequality we would rather not confront. But people who beg are not just poor; they are socially invisible. They are spoken to in harsh tones, spat near, pushed away, and seen as less than human.

A huge 216 out of 504 people said they had “no expectations” from state or society. This is not passive despair, it is the final stage of disillusionment. One expects something only from those considered one's own. To have no expectations means to have been pushed out of the social imagination entirely.

And yes, criticising the state, where it falters in its duty, is important. But if we cannot also act with personal responsibility, if we cannot skip a meal so that someone else may eat and live, then our ethics are not complete.

Continued Engagement

Given the scale of need and the limited capacity of our small team, Sam-Haq Trust may possibly be able to work directly with all 504 individuals who participated in this study, but not with thousands of men, women, and children across Mumbai and Navi Mumbai who live in similar or worse conditions. Every person in destitution deserves care, dignity,

and support. The 504 individuals we spoke to are not the only ones who need help; they are simply the few we were able to reach. Ideally, this work should extend to all those living on the margins, but our resources and human capacity are severely limited. We plan to continue our direct engagement with the individuals who emerged having urgent needs. This continuation of work is our effort towards long-term change in the lives of those most in need.

Coda

‘I Exist’ is a call to action. It invites society and policymakers to see beyond stereotypes, acknowledging the humanity in every individual, and creating systems grounded in genuine dignity, justice, and compassion. Historically, our public morality has failed this population for a long time. As a society, we have normalised hunger, homelessness, and humiliation in our streets, turning away from suffering that demands our attention. We tolerate exclusion and justify neglect through myths, blame, and indifference. But the Constitution of India speaks a different language: of dignity, of equality, and of justice for all. We, as an organisation, are confident that, guided by constitutional morality, our state and society can collectively work toward a future where the promise of liberty, equality, and fraternity becomes a lived reality for all, not merely a codified ideal. If the Constitution of our country can see these individuals as equal citizens, why can’t we?

‘I Exist’ is homeless and destitute citizens reminding us that they too exist; ‘I Exist’ is them questioning us of our indifference; ‘I Exist’ is them challenging collective apathy; ‘I Exist’ is destitute persons’ reminder to the society about the compassion and empathy it is capable of showering and sharing.

APPENDICES

FIELDWORK DEBRIEFING: REFLECTIONS AND LEARNINGS

After completing the data collection for *I Exist*, the team conducted a debriefing session to reflect on the experiences encountered during fieldwork. The project aimed to gather personal narratives and insights from individuals experiencing homelessness and destitution. Given the nature of the work, the fieldwork involved direct and intimate conversations with participants. This required the team to deal with various social and logistical challenges. The debriefing aimed to critically assess what went well, the obstacles faced, and potential improvements for future projects.

The team discussed about several factors that contributed to the smooth execution of the fieldwork. One of the key strengths was the team's long experience and continued engagement with the issue, which made rapport building significantly easier. The familiarity with the city also played a crucial role in efficiently identifying areas suitable for data collection. Working in pairs, particularly with mixed-gender teams, proved beneficial as it enhanced confidence and allowed for more nuanced engagement, especially when gender alignment mattered. Additionally, the questions themselves were simple and thoughtfully designed, helping participants feel connected and comfortable in sharing their thoughts. Contrary to initial apprehensions, most participants were willing to engage openly, showing a sense of trust and an absence of judgement or expectation of any reward. In some pockets, where the team was already acquainted with certain individuals, these known contacts facilitated interactions and introduced the team to potential participants. Our being able to modulate voice and tone thoughtfully also contributed to building a trustworthy and empathetic conversational environment.

Another positive aspect noted was the way practice over time improved the flow and naturalness of interactions. Initial concerns about people's reluctance to participate were proven unfounded, as most participants readily shared their experiences. Moreover, gender considerations were thoughtfully addressed by forming teams with male and female members, which helped bridge potential gaps in communication and facilitated more inclusive interactions.

However, the fieldwork also presented several challenges. One of the primary difficulties involved cross-gender conversations, where some participants felt uneasy or apprehensive. It happened because on occasion, because of logistical reasons, we did not go to the field in mixed-gender pairs. Additionally, language barriers emerged occasionally, complicating communication despite our team comprising of diverse linguistic backgrounds: Marathi, Hindustani, Bhojpuri, English, Kashmiri, Nepali. In some instances, the presence of mental health issues among participants made interactions challenging.

Logistical challenges also came up during the fieldwork. The team sometimes faced difficulty in aligning their visits with the availability of participants, leading to missed opportunities. Occasionally, participants expressed reluctance to engage, often due to apprehensions that speaking openly might lead to some harm afterward. There were also instances when the team felt a sense of discomfort for occupying the participants' valuable time. Another issue identified was the inconsistency in maintaining a streamlined timeline, which sometimes disrupted the planned workflow.

Reflecting on these experiences, the team acknowledged that better planning and clearer timelines could have mitigated some of these logistical issues. Addressing language diversity more proactively and being mindful of participants' schedules would also enhance the quality and continuity of field interactions. Additionally, future projects could benefit from more strategic pairing of team members to address gender and language dynamics effectively.



By critically evaluating both the positive and challenging aspects of the field experience, the team got precious insights into improving future data collection practices. The lessons drawn from this project underscore the importance of adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and more meticulous planning in field-based research, especially when engaging with vulnerable and marginalised populations.

Following the debriefing, the team also engaged in a session focused on writing case studies. The purpose of this session was to equip team members with the skills necessary to document field experiences coherently and analytically. Each team member subsequently drafted one case study. These case studies have been incorporated into the report, offering detailed narratives that complement the overall findings.

It is worth mentioning that some team members felt more comfortable expressing themselves in Hindi rather than English. To honour their linguistic preference and to maintain the authenticity of their reflections, these case studies have been included in Hindi. This ensures that the narratives are presented in a manner that remains true to the voice of the writers, thereby enriching the report with diverse perspectives and maintaining linguistic inclusivity.

A. Field Insights of Team Members

a. Beyond the Counselling Room, into Raw Realities

This was my first real field experience as a professional, and it was nothing like I had ever imagined. Until now, counselling for me always existed in structured spaces: quiet rooms, scheduled sessions, and theoretical frameworks. But out here in the field, on the streets, I stepped into someone else's world, entirely a world filled with raw emotions, noise, silence, chaos, and resilience. No classroom or textbook could have prepared me for this. On the day when we started the demo for this project, I was filled with both nervousness and excitement. That mixture of feelings sat heavy in my chest as I walked toward Jama Masjid in Nerul. But the moment I sat down on the roadside beside an aunty to talk, that nervousness melted away. It wasn't about techniques or checklists anymore, it was about presence. Genuine, human presence. I was not holding a notepad, neither was I trying to apply a theory. I was just there, as one person connecting with another. And that was enough. I have spoken to many people before, but this experience was different. It felt like a shift within me, like something had cracked open. It was a booster, something that pushed me forward, made me realise that in the absence of counselling rooms and structured interventions, what truly matters is the willingness to simply be with someone in their reality.

Each day, field taught me something new, not just about others, but about myself. I thought I was there to offer support, but I found myself learning more than I ever expected. I saw people who had lost everything but still dreaming about better days. I witnessed strength in the middle of deep pain; what struck me the most was the resilience. As a counsellor trained to look for symptoms, anxiety, depression, psychosis, trauma I also began to see defence mechanisms in action, not in textbooks, but in real lives. People smiled through suffering, used humour to mask their pain, and showed mistrust as a form of emotional self-preservation. I saw learned helplessness, dissociation, all classic trauma responses, unfolding naturally in conversation. It reminded me that what we often label as "difficult behaviour" is in many cases, just a survival strategy that helped someone stay alive.

There was one interaction that hits me to my core: a young girl, probably in her late teens, told me that she intentionally keeps herself *dirty*. When I asked why, she replied, because if I look clean, men notice me. They follow me, say things, try to touch me. But if I look dirty, they leave me alone. Her words felt like a punch to the chest. That night, and the night after, I couldn't sleep. The psychological impact of her decision, the internalized fear, the burden of constantly navigating safety, the loss of bodily autonomy was devastating. She had learned to use dirt as armour. For her, filth was not a sign of neglect; it was a trauma-informed survival tactic. It was her way of creating a boundary in a world that had never respected hers.

We are taught about how safety must come before growth. But here I was, speaking to someone who had to *sacrifice dignity* in order to feel *safe*. It reframed everything I thought I knew. That moment revealed the intersection of psychological theory and social injustice in its rawest form. This whole experience practically showed me how mental health

is connected to much more than just the mind. It's about how people live, how they're treated, and what they go through. Many of the people I met weren't just homeless or mentally ill, they were people who had been let down by the system again and again. Their trauma came not just from their past, but from how society treated them every day. Many of them had been hurt so much that they started to believe they deserved it. That kind of deep pain affects everything: how they think, how they feel, and how they act.

I also saw how people are often judged without understanding their story. Society says things like *they are like that*, without knowing why. But if you sit with someone and really listen, you learn that no one is born broken. People learn how to survive, and sometimes their ways of coping seem bad to others, but those ways may have helped them stay alive.

During this field study, I encountered that in darkest of places, there is always someone who cares, someone who doesn't turn away. That gave me hope. But it also made me question: Is that enough? Doesn't everyone deserve safety, respect, and dignity?

This experience has broadened my perspective more (empathy is not a feeling, it's an action). That holding space means sitting in someone's pain without rushing to fix it. That sometimes, the most therapeutic thing we can offer is not a technique or a diagnosis, but presence.

—Aaliya Rakiba

b. सड़क पर ज़िंदगी से रूबरू

सर्वे करते वक्त लोगों के इमोशन, उनके आँसू उनका समाज के और सरकार के प्रति जो दृष्टिकोण है वह ज्यादा पास से समझ आया। अभी तक जो मैंने भिक्षुकरी केसेस देखे थे वो सारे पुलिस द्वारा पकड़कर संस्था में आये पर अभी जो केसेस देखे तो उसका अनुभव बहुत ही अलग रहा। हम सड़क पर मंदिर के पास, चर्च के बाहर, मस्जिद के पास, गुरुद्वारा मार्केट की जगह तथा सिग्नल पर भिक्षा मांगते हुए लोगो को देखते हैं और एक समझ बनती है कि उनके घर अच्छे हैं, वह ऐसे अच्छे पैसे कमाते हैं, अच्छे से खाते पीते होंगे ऐसी समझ बनाकर उन्हें अनदेखा करके निकल जाते हैं। पर कभी उनके पास जाकर बात करने की कोशिश नहीं करते हैं।

इस सर्वे के दौरान ऐसे समुदाय के साथ सीधे बात करने का मौका मिला। मेरी पहली केस लक्ष्मी थी। मैं उसको हमेशा मिलती और देखती थी, पर कभी बात नहीं की। आज 20.11.2024 को जब मेरी पहली बार उसने बात हुई, मैंने उनको पूछा क्या हम थोड़ी देर बात कर सकते हैं उन्होंने एक सेकंड भी नहीं सोचा और मेरे साथ सड़क के किनारे बैठ गईं, उनके बारे में देखकर लगता था यह तो अच्छी हैं पर जब उनसे बात हुई तो उन्होंने बताया कि उनका आन्ध्र प्रदेश से लेकर सिग्नल तक का सफर कैसे रहा है। गाँव में हालात ठीक नहीं होने के कारण शादी के बाद कुछ साल में पतिने छोड़ दिया। मायके में परिवार की आर्थिक स्थिति ठीक नहीं है और मेरा एक बच्चा है जिसके लिए मुंबई आई हूँ। पेट में अल्सर है इसलिए काम नहीं होता है तो सिग्नल पर भिक्षा मांगती हूँ और पैसे गांव भेजती हूँ। कोई पैसा देता है कोई नहीं देता, गुस्से से देखते हैं गाली देते हैं। कहते हैं अच्छी तो हैं, भिक्षा क्यों मांगती है। कुछ लोग गाड़ी रोक कर कहते हैं हमारे साथ चलो, हम 500 रुपये देंगे।

उनकी तरफ से यह सब सुनकर ऐसा लगा कि लोगोंने इन्सानियत कहीं खो दी हैं। सुनकर खुदको भी लग रहा था मैं भी इस समाज भाग हूँ जहाँ लोग कमजोर लोगो का जैसे चाहते हैं वैसा मजाक उड़ा सकते हैं।

दादर केस³⁹ का अनुभव: एक महिला सड़क पर है। उसके पास में 10 कदम पर सरकारी यंत्रणा है, सामाजिक संस्था है और हम समाज। सभी होकर भी यह महिला वैसेही सड़क पर दिन गुजार रही हैं, और हम महिलाओं की सुरक्षा की बातें करते हैं। उस दिन सिस्टम और समाज से थोड़ा हताश होने जैसा लगा कोई काम नहीं आया।

पारदी समाज के संदर्भ में कहें तो नवी मुंबई महानगरपालिका में हमें काफी लोग मिले जो सोलापुर, , अमरावती, लातूर, नागपुर इन जगहों से आए दिखे। उन्होंने जो कहा वह कुछ बातें मुझे पहले से पता थीं जैसे गाँव में काम नहीं है खेती के लिए जमीन नहीं है इसलिए कमाने के लिए और परिवार का गुजारा करने मुंबई आते हैं। skilled नहीं होने के कारण कचरा साफ करना, नाले साफ करने का काम करना पड़ता है उसमें भी मुकादम कभी ठीक से पैसे देता है कभी पैसे खा लेता है। इसलिए हमारे लोग खिलौने और गजरा बेचते हुए ज्यादा दिखते हैं। पर कहीं भी पुलिस बेचने नहीं देती है। पकड़ती है उन्हें और समाज को लगता है कि कुछ बेचने के नाम पर हम भिक्षा मांगते हैं।

सर्वे के दौरान कुछ तृतीयपंथियों से हम मिले। उन्हें भी पास से समझने का मौका मिला, महिला या पुरुष के अलावा कुछ अलग होने के कारण परिवार से कैसे उन्हें बाहर निकाल दिया जाता है। किन्नरों के साथ रहकर भी उनके साथ अन्याय होते हैं नया, पुराना। कुछ लोगो के साथ रहते हैं तो उनके साथ लैगिंग शोषण भी होता है। HIV की बीमारी कई किन्नरों ने बताया। उन्होंने बताया की हमारे अपनों ने हमको निकाला है तो हम गैरोंको (समाज, सरकार) क्या बोलें।

सर्वे में जवान लड़किया, बुर्जुग जो घर से निकाले गए हैं, अपंग हैं, शारीरिक रूप से बीमार, तृतीयपंथी, मानसिक बिमार, घर में गाँव में आर्थिक परिस्थिती के कारण सड़क पर हैं ऐसे लोग, पारिवारिक झगड़ों के कारण सड़क पर आए हुए लोग। सभी स्तरों से निकाला गया एक ऐसा समाज सड़क पर दिखा जिसको पास से जानने का मौका मिला।

लड़की जिनसे मैं मिली उन्होंने बताया गन्दा रहना अच्छा नहीं लगता पर साफ रहेंगे तो गलत होगा इसलिए गन्दी रहती हूँ क्योंकि सड़क पर सोती हूँ, कभी-कभी जैसा देश, वैसा भेस करना पड़ता है। जैसे अगर दरगाह पर हूँ तो नकाब पहनते हैं तो ही पैसे मिलते हैं, मंदिर के पास नकाब निकालकर बैठना पड़ता है तो पैसे मिलते हैं।

कुछ लोग ऐसे दिखे जो शुक्रवार के दिन मस्जिद पर दिखे, वही लोग मंगलवार के दिन मंदिर पर दिखे, और फिर रविवार के दिन चर्च पर दिखे। कई लोग खुद के ऐरिया में बदनामी ना हो इसके डर से घर से २ से ३ घंटे दूर आकर भिक्षा मांगते हुए दिखे।

एक समझ आयी की व्यक्ति को जिंदगी में जीने के लिए, और परिवार के पोषण के लिए, सबसे लास्ट स्तर पर जाकर गुजारा करना पड़ रहा है।

उनको सरकार और हम समाज से कोई अपेक्षा नहीं है। यह भी बात करते वक्त समझ आ रहा था। क्योंकि जो अनुभव उन्होंने बताये वह कुछ प्रमाण में ठिक थे पर ज्यादा अनुभव उन्हें सड़को पर रहते खराब ही करना पड़ रहा है।

अपनी संस्था का मैं आभार मानती हूँ की उसने यह सर्वे करने में मुझे जोड़ा।

—पल्लवी ठाकरे

c. मुझे कैसा लगा!

पहली बार भिक्षावृत्ति में जुड़े हुए समूह का अध्ययन करने निकला। काफी जिज्ञासा बढ़ रही थी। क्योंकि एक नया तथा दिलचस्प अनुभव मेरे सामने आने वाला था।

³⁹ This case study can be found on page number 12 of this report.

मेरे अनुभव के हिसाब से मुंबई, नवी मुंबई, रायगढ़ जिले के एरिया के बारे में मुझे कल्पना-जानकारी थी, तथा वहां भिक्षयावृत्ति में जुड़े हुए लोग कहां-कहां, कौन-कौन से इलाके में मुझे मिल सकते हैं उसके बारे में कुछ ज्ञात था। लेकिन उनके साथ में रूबरू होने पर इतनी सखोल (deeply) सरल सवाल करके भिक्षावृत्ति में जी रहे लोगो की जानकारी साझा करना अपने आप में एक बड़ा जरिया लग रहा था तथा खुद के अभ्यास में एक नया अनुभव मिलने जा रहा था। और सचमुच वह मिला भी!

अध्ययन के दौरान मैंने विरार, वसई, मीरा रोड, बोरीवली, कांदिवली, मलाड, अंधेरी, माहिम स्टेशन, माहिम दरगाह, दादर स्टेशन, सिद्धिविनायक मंदिर, मुंबई सेंट्रल, हाजी अली, ठाणे, घाटकोपर, कुर्ला, डोंबिवली, मुंब्रा, कल्याण, हाजी मलंग, पनवेल, खंडेश्वर, नेरूल, कोपरखैरणे, घणसोली, सानपाड़ा, तुर्भे, सैंडहर्स्ट रोड, जे जे ब्रिज, मोहम्मद अली रोड, डोंगरी, मुंबई छत्रपति शिवाजी महाराज टर्मिनस, काला घोड़ा और गेट ऑफ़ इंडिया जैसे स्थान कवर किये और लोगों से बातचीत की।

अध्ययन के दौरान मुझे पता चला कि भिक्षावृत्ति में जी रहे लोगों के बारे में आम धारणाएं कितनी गलत हैं। मैंने जिस भी व्यक्ति के साथ में बात की तो यह पता चला कि शारीरिक, मानसिक, आर्थिक, सामाजिक, राजकीय स्थिति के अभाव के कारण वह व्यक्ति भिक्षावृत्ति में आया।

धूप, बारिश और ठण्ड के मौसम में बिना रुके मांगना पड़ता है। खुद की गरिमा (आत्मसम्मान) को भी अपनी व अपने परिवार भूख की वजह से दांव पर लगा रहे हैं। कई लोग ऐसे मिले जो अपने एरिया से हटकर अन्य दूसरे एरिया में जाकर भिक्षा मांगा करते हैं। ताकि उनके जानने वाले उन्हें भिक्षा मांगते हुए देख न सकें; ताकि उनके खुद के बच्चे व रिश्तेदार इस बात से अनभिज्ञ ही रहें।

असंगठित क्षेत्र में काम करने वाले युवा भी फ्री भोजन की लाइन में लग रहे थे। क्योंकि सच बात यह है कि जो असंगठित क्षेत्र में काम करने वाले लोग हैं, उनको डेली काम नहीं मिलता है। इस वजह से खुद का गुजारा करने के लिए एक समय का भी अनाज मिल पाए, इसकी खोज में जहां भोजन मिलता है उस जगह पर जाते हैं।

मुझे मस्जिद, दरगाह है, उस जगह पर ज्यादा लोग दिखाई दिए। वहां भिक्षा मिल रही थी। लेकिन मंदिर के बाहर कम लोग दिखाई दिए। इसका सचमुच एक विश्लेषण हो सकता है।

भिक्षा मांगने वाले कई सारे लोग जाति धर्म के अनुसार अपना शारीरिक पहनावा तथा नाम बदलते दिखाई दिए। कई लोगों ने अपनी खुद की पहचान छुपा कर रखी। जब उनके साथ में गहराई से बात की तो उन्होंने अपनी सही पहचान बताई।

रेलवे स्टेशन के आस-पास वृद्धाएं, शारीरिक अपंग तथा बीमार लोग मिले। सभी लोगों का संघर्ष, कहानी अलग-अलग थी जिसने मेरे मन को भी झंझोड़ डाला।

मुझे लगता है कि यदि समय पर उन्हें सपोर्ट मिल जाता, तो जो लोग भिक्षावृत्ति में आ गए, उनकी कहानी कुछ और हो सकती थी।

—शशिकांत भालेराव

d. सच कुछ और था...

ये मेरा फील्ड का पहला अनुभव था, जहां मुझे किसी अजनबी व्यक्ति से बात करनी थी। जब मैंने हमारे इस अभ्यास के बारे में सुना कि हमें फील्ड पर भिक्षावृत्ति में जी रहे लोगों से उनके अनुभवों को समझना है, और आम लोगों की धारणा को परखना है, तो मुझे थोड़ी झिझक महसूस हुई। मैं सोच रही थी कि क्या मैं लोगों से बात कर पाऊंगी? क्या वे लोग मुझसे बात करेंगे? और आस-पास के लोग क्या सोचेंगे? अगर किसी ने कुछ उल्टा-सीधा कह दिया तो? ये सारे सवाल मेरे मन में थे। इन्हीं सवालों के साथ मैं पहली बार लक्ष्मी से मिली। लक्ष्मी से बात करते समय मुझे यह एहसास ही नहीं हुआ कि कौन देख रहा है और कौन क्या सोचेगा। उस दिन पहली बार मुझे एहसास हुआ कि लोग कितने मजबूर होते हैं; अपनों की खातिर दूसरों के आगे अपना स्वाभिमान भी भुला देते हैं। वे भी भिक्षा मांगकर जीवन नहीं बिताना चाहते, लेकिन वे इतने बेबस हैं कि न चाहते हुए भी उन्हें दूसरों के सामने हाथ फैलाना पड़ता है।

ये सारी सोच खत्म हो गई।

इस अभ्यास से पहले मुझे भी लगता था कि शायद भिक्षावृत्ति से जुड़े लोगों को भिक्षा मांगना आसान लगता होगा और वो मेहनत वाला काम नहीं करना चाहते हैं, इसलिए मांगते हैं। मुझे लगता था कि भिक्षावृत्ति में जुड़े लोग इसे एक व्यवसाय की तरह देखते हैं और इनके पास सच में बहुत पैसा है। और जैसे मैंने समाज से ही सुना है कि एक बॉस होता है जो लोगों को पकड़ते हैं और जबरजस्ती भिक्षा मांगवाते हैं और उनकी कुछ मजदूरी उन्हें देते हैं। मैं बचपन से सुनती थी हाजी अली दरगाह पर बैठ कर भिक्षा मांगने के लिए जगह का किराया देना पड़ता है और उनके पास बहुत पैसा होता है और मैं इन बातों पर यकीन भी करने लगी थी, लेकिन जैसे जैसे मैं लोगों से बात करती रही मेरी हर गलत समझ और धारणाएं दूर होती गईं। समझ आया कि सच्चाई इससे कहीं दूर है, भिक्षावृत्ति में जुड़े लोग बुजुर्ग हैं, बच्चे हैं जिनकी देखभाल के लिए कोई नहीं है, बीमार हैं (शारीरिक और मानसिक), विकलांग हैं, या वो उस समाज का हिस्सा हैं जिन्हें लोग अपने यहां काम नहीं देना चाहते हैं, या उनके जीवन में कोई ऐसी घटना घटी जिसने उन्हें इस राह पर लाकर खड़ा कर दिया।

यदि मुझे कोई हल्का सा भी डांट दे तो मुझे बहुत बुरा लगता है, दो तीन दिन मेरे मन में वही सारी बातें चलती हैं। जिन्हें हम भिक्षेकारी कहते हैं, हम उन्हें क्या-क्या नहीं कहते; कई बार गालियां देते हैं, बदतमीजी करते हैं, बेइज्जत करते हैं। हमें उनके स्वाभिमान का ख्याल ही नहीं रहता है। हमें एक बार भी एहसास नहीं होता है कि वह लोग बड़ी आशा के साथ हमारे सामने अपना सवाल रखते हैं, एक उम्मीद होती है उनकी कि यह हमारी मदद करेंगे। पर जब लोग उन्हें उल्टा बोलते हैं तो उनके मन में कितना गहरा घाव पड़ता है, यह मैं समझ पा रही थी। मैं ये भी देख पा रही थी कि कोई उन्हें गाली दे या भला बुरा कहे तो भी वो लोग उन्हें दुआ देते थे। मैं तो यही सोचती हूँ कि उनका दिल कितना बड़ा है या इतने बेबस हैं कि अपने स्वाभिमान पर चोट भी इस तरह से झेल रहे हैं।

हमारे समाज का दोहरा चरित्र देखिए। एक ओर तो हम उन लोगों को गंदे रहने पर झिड़क देते हैं कि हमसे दूर रहो। पर हमारे ही समाज के कुछ लोग उन्हें 200 से 500 रुपये देते हैं और कहते हैं हमारे साथ चल (शारीरिक संबंध बनाने के लिए)।

समाज के आम नागरिकों ने उनके खिलाफ गलत धारणाएं बना रखी हैं। उन्हें अपने से कमतर और हकीर जानते हैं। ये लोग भी आम इंसानों की तरह जिंदगी जीने का सपना देखते हैं। एक अंजान इंसान को वो अपनी जिंदगी की दास्तान सुना रहे थे यही इस बात को समझने के लिए काफी है कि कितना अकेला महसूस करते हैं वह लोग। कोई उनके पास बैठता भी नहीं है उनसे नमी से बात क्या ही करेंगे। वो क्षण मेरे लिए खुशी, दुख, लाचारी जैसी भावनाओं की मिली जुली कैफियत थी जब मुझे लोगों ने कहा कि तुम पहली इंसान हो जो मेरे बाजू में बैठ कर मेरे साथ इज्जत से बात कर रही हो। मैं यही देख रही थी कि ये लोग कितने आशावादी और विश्वास करने वाले हैं, जिनके साथ रोज विश्वासघात होता है। मैं तो ये बात कभी समझ ही नहीं पाती हूँ कि हमारे समाज का ढांचा ऐसा क्यों है जो कमजोर को और कमजोर बनाता जा रहा है और जो विशेषाधिकार-संपन्न है और उन्हें और ज्यादा विशेषाधिकार मिलते जा रहे हैं।

इस अभ्यास के लिए हम मुंबई, नवी मुंबई, पालघर, पनवेल ये सभी जगहों पर गए जहां पर मेरे कुछ अवलोकन रहे जैसे दरगाह, मस्जिद, मंदिर यहां भिक्षा लेने वालों के साथ कम बदतमीजी होती है, जबकि रोड्स और सिग्नल्स पर मांगने वालों के साथ ज्यादा होती है। लोग इलाके की बहुसंख्या के अनुसार अपनी वेशभूषा रखते हैं। उदाहरणतः, कई गैर मुस्लिम लोग मुस्लिम वेशभूषा में दरगाह और मस्जिद के बाहर नजर आए। ऐसे ही हर इलाके में जिस कोम की संख्या ज्यादा है लोग उस वेशभूषा में दिखे।

कुछ इलाके ऐसे थे जहां भिक्षा में जुड़े लोग ज्यादा मिले, तो कुछ इलाकों में न के बराबर मिले। धारावी एशिया का सबसे बड़ा स्लम माना जाता है। वहां हमें एक ही व्यक्ति दरगाह के बाहर मिला जब इसका कारण समझने की कोशिश की तो ये समझ बनी कि वो बस्ती अपने आपमें आर्थिक रूप से सम्पूर्ण लगी। वहां बड़े-छोटे बहुत कारखाने, घरेलू उद्योग हैं जिसके कारण हर व्यक्ति के पास रोजगार है और यही कारण है कि वहां व्यक्ति कुछ भी करके आत्मनिर्भरता के साथ इज्जत की जिंदगी गुजार सकता है।

—खान मेहरोज

e. अदृश्य आबादी का सच

रिपोर्ट की प्रक्रिया के दौरान विभिन्न स्थानों जैसे कि खारघर श्री मंकी पॉइंट, खारघर डी-मार्ट, व्हाइट मंदिर खारघर, केंद्र विहार, बेलापुर कोकण भवन सिमल, सिवुड दरावे, वाशी ब्रिज, माहिम, काला घोड़ा, गेटवे ऑफ इंडिया, क्रॉस मैदान, मुंब्रा कब्रिस्तान, जुईनगर आदि में बातचीत की गई।

सर्वेक्षण के दौरान अधिकांश लोग मस्जिदों के आसपास मिले, जबकि मंदिर और चर्च के आस-पास ऐसे लोग बहुत कम संख्या में देखे गए। लोगों से बातचीत में पता चला कि काम न मिलने के कारण मजबूरीवश भिक्षा मांगनी पड़ती है। अधिकतर बुजुर्ग और दिव्यांग व्यक्तियों से मुलाकात हुई। हालांकि, कुछ ऐसे भी थे जो शारीरिक रूप से सक्षम थे और उम्र 30 से 45 के बीच थी। उन्होंने बताया कि नियमित काम नहीं मिलने के कारण भोजन के लिए भीख मांगनी पड़ती है। भीख मांगने के कार्य से वे अत्यंत दुखी और शर्मिंदा महसूस करते हैं, लेकिन जीविका के लिए यह मजबूरी बन चुकी है।

कई लोगों ने सरकार के प्रति अविश्वास व्यक्त किया और कहा कि सरकार गरीबों के लिए प्रभावी कदम नहीं उठाती। बुजुर्ग व्यक्तियों में से कई ऐसे भी थे जिन्हें उनके बच्चों ने विवाह के बाद घर से निकाल दिया था। बढ़ती उम्र में रोजगार न मिलने के कारण उन्हें मजबूरन भीख मांगनी पड़ती है।

एक मार्मिक वार्तालाप माहिम दरगाह के पास 50 वर्षीय मोहम्मद ताहिर से हुई, जो 35 वर्षों से मुंबई के धारावी में कपड़े काटने और सिलने का काम करते थे और उन्होंने अपने बच्चों को शिक्षित भी किया। कोविड-19 लॉकडाउन के कारण उनका रोजगार छिन गया, जिससे उनका परिवार आर्थिक संकट में आ गया। लॉकडाउन के बाद उन्हें थोड़ा-बहुत काम मिला, लेकिन कमाई अपर्याप्त थी और गिरती सेहत ने स्थिति को और भी कठिन बना दिया। किराया न दे पाने पर उन्होंने पनवेल में गारमेंट फैक्ट्री में कार्यरत अपने बेटे से मदद मांगी, जिसने सहायता देने से इंकार कर दिया। अंततः नासिर को किराये का घर छोड़ना पड़ा और चार महीने से माहिम दरगाह के पास दोपहर 2 बजे से रात 8 बजे तक भीख मांगकर गुजारा कर रहे हैं, जिसमें प्रतिदिन मुश्किल से ₹100 जुट पाते हैं। हमारे संवाद के दौरान शाम 7 बजे तक उनके कटोरे में केवल ₹30-35 थे। बातचीत के दौरान नासिर रो पड़े और प्रश्न किया कि बुढ़ापे में भीख मांगनी पड़े तो बच्चों के होने का क्या फायदा? इसके बाद धारावी में एक मस्जिद में इमामत करने लगे और मस्जिद में ही रहने लगे। लेकिन एक बार किसी बात पर वहां के मैनेजमेंट से अनबन होने के कारण वहां से भी निकलना पड़ा।

सर्वेक्षण के दौरान देखा गया कि मुस्लिम बहुल इलाकों में भीख मांगने वाले और देने वाले, दोनों की संख्या अपेक्षाकृत अधिक है।

इस सर्वेक्षण से कुछ बातें समझ में आयीं। पहली बात तो यह है कि बेरोजगारी और गरीबी की समस्या सिर्फ आर्थिक नहीं बल्कि सामाजिक-सांस्कृतिक कारकों से भी जुड़ी हुई है। दूसरी, सरकारी योजनाओं की पहुँच बहुत सीमित है, जिसके कारण जरूरतमंद लोग सरकार के प्रति अविश्वास रखते हैं। तीसरा, शहरों में आने वाले अस्थायी आर्थिक संकट स्थायी गरीबी की स्थिति पैदा कर देते हैं।

— शेखर थापा



f. Jivo Jivasya Jivanam

During my fieldwork, I came across a strange insight. Some of the participants I spoke to shared that they faced resistance from other people when trying to beg at certain spot. They explained that these places were already claimed by others who believed that if someone else sat near them, it would reduce their chances of receiving alms. The fear was that the presence of another person would split the attention and generosity of passers-by, decreasing their own income.

This territorial behaviour made me think about *jīvo jīvasya jīvanam*.⁴⁰ In the context of begging, this idea manifests as a survival instinct, where individuals feel compelled to protect their own means of subsistence. In a harsh urban environment, where opportunities to receive alms are uncertain, every small advantage, like a better spot, becomes crucial. Allowing someone else to occupy the same space feels like sharing a vital resource, which, in their perception, could threaten their very existence.

This revealed how survival instincts manifest even in spaces where one might expect solidarity. In a way, this competitive behaviour among persons in begging also resonates with the principle of *matsya nyaya*, the law of the fish, where the stronger or more established entities dominate and protect their territory against newcomers. The older ones, who came first to a particular spot, often see themselves as having earned the right to that space. This establishes a relation of power between the old and the newcomer person. For them, the arrival of a new destitute person can feel like a challenge to their territorial control. Just as the big fish eats the small fish, the 'more powerful' destitute assert to maintain their position, sometimes pushing the newcomers away.

It made me reflect on how vulnerability does not eliminate competition. Even those who share similar struggles and hardships may still find themselves competing for limited resources. It is not just a matter of rivalry, but a form of self-protective behaviour shaped by the need to survive. The reality is that solidarity and rivalry coexist within these communities. While they may share food or look out for each other during crises, the fear of losing a spot, and thereby losing income, drives them to defend their small spaces fiercely. It is not personal animosity, but a matter of one's own survival.

This tension between claiming physical space and sharing social space revealed a deeper insight: when life itself is precarious, the instinct to guard one's livelihood can override the impulse to help others. It is a complex negotiation, where cooperation and competition intersect, shaped by both the harshness of urban poverty and the deeply rooted instinct for survival. Understanding this dynamic has made me more aware of how struggles for survival shape social relations, even among those who are equally marginalised.

—Mohammad Shahid Afroz

⁴⁰ One living being is food for another.

B. Guiding Questions

1. Name (Sex):
2. Age:
3. Date and meeting place:
4. For how long have you been living here?
5. There is a common misconception among people that begging is very easy and very lucrative and people who earn their livelihood in this way do not want to work. We would like to know your experience in this regard.
6. There is also a common misconception among people that members of our community like to live in filth, which is why they live this way. But what is the truth?
7. Often, people pass by you without paying the slightest attention. They remain entirely unaware of your presence. In such a situation, what do you go through when you are compelled to ask them for money?
8. People see your external condition and form an image of you in their minds based on that. No one knows your real struggles. Would you like to share something about it?
9. What kind of future do you want for your children?
10. Tell us anything else that you want the society and the government to know about you.
11. Please write your personal observations.
12. Scope of direct intervention

THE TEAM

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Mohd. Tarique and Mohammad Shahid Afroz

Research Design

Mohd. Tarique and Mohammad Shahid Afroz

Fieldwork and Organisation of Field Material

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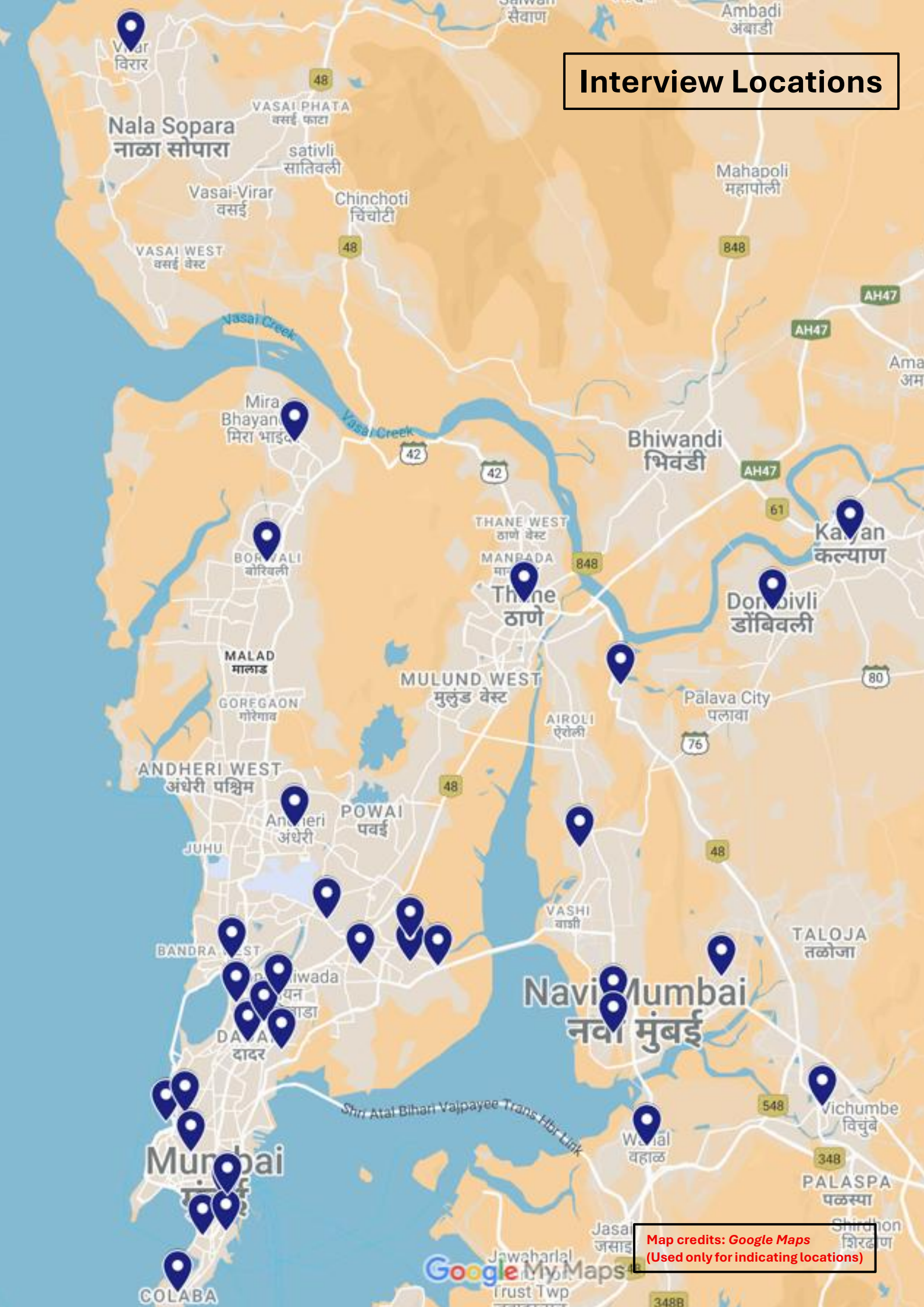
Analysis and Report Writing

Mohammad Shahid Afroz

Chapter: Portraits of Life in Destitution

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Interview Locations



Map credits: Google Maps
(Used only for indicating locations)

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