CHAPTER- 7

BEGGAR PROBLEM

The beggar problem itself and the problems of the victims of the system constitute a most complex problem covering socio-economic and humanitarian aspects. Beggary is considered by many as a symptom of social disorganization as it is a deviant pattern of behaviour.

Beggary is not a recent phenomenon in our country. It has its roots in the practice of alms-giving and the importance attached to it by the various religions has only aggravated it, apart from its ancient origins. The problem is today very extensively prevalent throughout the length and breadth of the country especially in conditions of industrialisation and urbanisation.

The beggar problem of today is somewhat of a different nature than it was in the past and it is taking a colossal turn in the growing cities of India. It is a social problem in that the beggars form burdens on society and very often causes hazards to public health. It is first of all a problem from the point of view of the beggar. It implies for him/her an inhuman life of squalor and filth, of want and exploitation and disease. It is also a problem for their off-springs. Because it implies undernourishment and inadequate or practically no opportunities at all for education. It also means idleness, bad company and delinquent behaviour. Moreover, the existence of these vagrants means non-utilization of available human resources as well as also a drag upon the existing resources of the society. From the public health viewpoint, beggars are great hazards in cities. Besides these
as has been observed by some researchers, beggars in the cities are a marginal social group and have sometimes been found to be associated with activities of the underworld.

The beggar problem is an economic problem also. The larger the number of beggars in a locality, the greater is the strain on their income. There are some able-bodied beggars whose conditions are dangerous and harmful when they attract other vagrants* and idlers to join them.

Thus the beggar problem is a complex socio-economic problem for the urban social workers.

**Definition:**

Simply stated, by a beggar we mean a person who asks for alms on charity or performs such actions which derive sympathy from others, to the extent of giving something in turn. The Bombay Beggars Act of 1945 has defined begging, "..... as soliciting or receiving alms in a public place whether or not under any pretence such as singing, dancing, fortune-telling, performing tricks and selling articles, exposing or exhibiting any sore wound, injury, deformity or disease whether of human being or of animals, for the purpose of obtaining or exhorting alms." A person without means

* The legal term "vagrancy" which includes beggars is commonly applied with reference to persons who have neither definite domicile nor visible means of support. Vagrancy is considered by many as a form of delinquency.
of subsistence and wandering about or found in public places or allowing himself to be used as an exhibit for the purpose of begging is also covered by the definition.

Begging is a phenomenon closely associated with the emergence of private property. Begging has tended to become an organized profession. The distinction between the professional beggar and the unemployed labourers who begs until he can find work, remains difficult to draw; because both groups are produced by unsettled social and economic conditions; the unemployed soon becomes a professional beggar.

Types of beggars:

Beggars may be classified into the following types:

1. Able bodied beggars:

Able bodied beggars are those who beg either because they are unemployed or underemployed and have no other sources of earning or because they prefer begging to work, though they are quite able to work. They also include some wandering women with babies in their arms who invoke the sympathy of the givers in the name of "poor, fatherless, hungry children". Moreover, there are a great number of able-bodied child beggars whose parents are not able to support them or deliberately encourage them to beg or they may be fatherless or orphan.

Able bodied beggars constitute a greater part of the beggar population.
2. **Physically disabled and sick or diseased beggars**:

Among the physically disabled may be included blind, deaf, dumb, crippled and sometimes physically weak owing to old age. A cruel truth is that sometimes children are made disabled by the professionals or some times some parents make use of their disabled children to create sympathy amongst the alm-givers.

Sick and diseased beggars are generally found to be suffering from chronic and incurable diseases, e.g., leprosy, venereal diseases, tuberculosis, skin diseases etc.

3. **Mentally deficient**:

Mentally deficient, i.e., insane persons also become beggars if they have no one to take care of.

4. **Hereditary beggars**:

Because of social customs in certain communities they consider begging as their hereditary profession. Among them are the Nats, Bajigars, Sains, Jugglers, Bhatta and Kanjars. But this type of beggars is fewer in number.

5. **Religious Mendicants**:

Among this type of beggars may be included Yogis, Bairagis, Faqir, Darvesh, Kabir Panthi, Nanak Sahib etc. These beggars are familiar with their paraphernalia of saffron-robes, woodbead necklace, bond in hand or purple coloured decorated with ashes.
There are some bogus religious mendicants also. These religious mendicants wander throughout the country.

Besides these types of beggars there are some fake beggars, though fewer in number who pose as physically disabled like blind, crippled or sick.

All these types of beggars have no particular mode of begging. The disabled and sick ones who have wounds etc. exhibit their disabilities and make frequent appeals to people through appropriate gestures. One also comes across a scene where a beggar suffering from leprosy or otherwise deformed or disabled is shoved in a small wheel-cart by able-bodied, even disabled ones, some of them making appeals through song or duets. However, all these modes and behaviour patterns emanate from the beggars' needs and their objective is to touch the heart of the people.

Causes of beggary:

It is difficult to assign a particular cause or set of causes to the institution of beggary. For the sake of charity these causes may be divided into four types, but many a time these situations overlap. But it is noteworthy that the underlying cause in each and every case is the poverty of the family or lack of employment.

A. Economic causes:

The three main economic causes are given below:
(i) **Poverty:**

Destitution is the main factor which forces some people to take to begging. Lack of employment opportunities in villages either because of tiny holding or non-availability of other work, system of land tenures and tyrannical landlordism which impoverish tenants and squeeze them out of their holdings, debts, natural calamities like floods and famines imposing particular hardships on communities and families and epidemics which either weaken or drive communities away — all these conditions force thousands of people to resort to begging when they cannot find employment in the cities.

(ii) **Unemployment and Under-employment:**

This is a direct cause of begging. When unskilled persons cannot earn anything for their bare minimum necessities, some of them resort to begging.

(iii) **Lucrative business:**

Owing to easy gains and sufficient income from begging, many people make it a profession instead of doing hard and honest labour. Moreover, it is also found by some researchers that there are groups of people operating in big cities which force many people to this profession. They arrange for beggars' accommodation in some alms or tenement and offer them food, cash and dirty cloths. These victims are in effect their 'wage earners' and they bring home every evening the hard day's collection of alms from the different localities of the cities so that all or their masters have a share in the gains of these organized beggars.
B. Social Causes:

(i) Family disorganization:

The disturbances in home conditions, especially in case of poor families, leading breakdowns at times might give rise to beggary. The even tenor in a family may be upset by death of parents, death of the husband or earning member of the family, drunkenness or other misbehaviour of parents, step-parental treatment, disruption in the family or desertion by the husband etc.

Most of the children who beg have nobody to support them. Lack of parental control is also an important cause leading children to beggary in industrial societies. Moreover in India, in the past, the joint family system supported the handicapped, orphans, the blind, etc. But owing to the break-up in the joint family system, such persons who are thrown into the street have no other means of earning except begging.

(ii) Community disorganization:

Disorganization in the rural community may also be responsible for increase in the population of beggars. Previously in India, when the village councils were functioning properly it was considered to be their duty to look after the poor, the disabled and the infirm. Today, in the individualistic society the destitute sections of population become more and more isolated and they have to earn their food by all means including begging.
C. Biological causes:

These may sometimes lead to beggary. The important biological causes are sickness and disease, physical and mental disability, infirmity due to old age, etc.

Thus lack of institutions for providing for the welfare of the unattached, the abandoned and the disabled in the society is greatly responsible for the causation of beggary in any society.

D. Religious causes:

Religious sanction to certain types of begging is also responsible for beggary in certain communities. Indiscriminate alms-giving by the public because of their religious sentiments encourage these types of beggars.

Besides these, there are some other factors leading to beggary. For instance, there are some persons upon whom beggary is enforced. Ignorant persons, sometimes use their children for purpose of increasing their earning through begging. Many poor parents even trade on their children's infirmities using these as sources of supplementary income. There are some orphans, waifs and strays who are sometimes maimed or disfigured so that they can earn through begging and the income is shared by those who forced the children so cruelly into begging.

Any or even a combination of all these factors, excepting the religious mendicancy and forcefulness, do not always lead people into the path of begging. Beggary becomes a way of life for those who consider it to be
their destiny to beg. Some of the beggars do not hold that begging is a mean way of subsisting while others resort to this path quite unwillingly and under the force of circumstances. Whatever be the specific cause of beggary, the fact remains that excluding a section of religious mendicants, the underlying factor of the causation of beggary is nothing but the economic miseries of the people concerned.

All the adverse effects of the beggar problem have been reflected in the urban areas. But the root of this lies in the rural background; those who do not have work to do, forsake their places to come to cities, etc. Most of these people increase the already heavy burden on the urban informal sector. A large section of the unskilled persons, being unable to get any kind of employment, gradually exhaust their slender resources. After some time, they start asking people either for loans if they have relatives in the city or for charity and thus imperceptibly, unconsciously and in many instances, quite consciously lapse into a state of mendicancy. This process speedily happens or is slowly brought about depending on the physical, financial, intellectual and moral resources of the person concerned. And from this stage, it does not take much time to resort to the path of confirmed beggary; because there are opportunities in urban areas, which rapidly convert a hesitant, shy beggar into a bold and confirmed one. Moreover there are some rural poor who migrate to the city as a beggar in the hope of earning more through begging in cities. It is also observed that in India, due to the possibility of easy and free railway travel, poor people easily migrate to the cities.
In a survey of 100 beggars in Ahmedabad city, when the beggars were questioned as to why they beg, different reasons were given which were summarized as below:

1. Poverty, unsupported, unemployed, part-time beggars 56
2. Habitual beggars 21
3. Physically handicapped, mentally retarded, diseased 18
4. Cruelty of relatives 1
5. To live a carefree life 1
6. Fatalist 1
7. Shameful remorse for his incestuous relation 1
8. Shown to live as prostitute 1

100

In majority of the cases the driving force was economic. At the same time, hereditary begging was equally staggering. Since one-fifth of the beggars were hereditary, this underlined the gravity and urgency of the problem.

Of the 100 beggars of the survey only 28 were local and 72 of them migrated from other parts of the country and the causes of their migration were as follows:

2. Patel, T., op. cit.
1. Poverty due to various reasons such as indebtedness, loss of crop etc., in search of job, for earning 29
2. For the sake of begging 13
3. Migrated with parents or other relatives 9
4. Loss of interest in the family and in the world, family quarrels, family calamity such as loss of husbands, parents etc. 9
5. Migratory habit 2
6. Not known 10

72

Most of the beggars in the survey were found to be homeless. Out of 100 beggars in the survey, 63 were illiterate and 37 were literate, the standard of literacy being high (beyond primary level) in a few cases only.\footnote{\textnormal{\textsuperscript{1}}}

In cities, most of the beggars dwell on the pavements. These people have a tendency to live round places where there are municipal lavatories and drinking water facilities. Many beggars live at convenient places in the railway stations or bus stations. Beggars freely move on trains, play their trades and go back to rest at such places.

Pollution of urban atmosphere:

Beggars pollute the urban atmosphere in several ways. The sick and diseased beggars spread diseases not only amongst themselves but they are also carriers of infection and diseases in parts of the locality. Beggers
suffering from leprosy not only present a most dismal and distressing spectacle to even the casual visitors, they also endanger the health of the community. Most of the beggars are found to remain unclean because they cannot afford to remain clean. Even though, some of the beggars may be found somewhat clean near their abodes they nevertheless have to use rags and keep themselves dirty when engaged in their trade. Apparently many of them get diseased by remaining unclean and filthy.

Vices among beggars:

The disparity between the two sexes, particularly in connection with the general population of beggars, is responsible for giving rise to certain vices among the female population of beggars. Many female beggars are found to be indulging in the practice of immoral sex gratification. Some women who after once having taken to earning by such immoral practices, could not get out of it even though they might attempt to retreat from it. Moreover some beggars are found to be involved in illegal activities, e.g., theft, robbery, child-lifting etc.

Case-Study of Greater Guwahati:

It has not been possible to make an estimate of the total beggar population in Greater Guwahati. But the extent of the problem is easily noticeable throughout the city. With the growth in the city-population, the number of beggars has been also been growing at an alarming rate.
Most of the beggars in Greater Guwahati are migrants, generally from rural areas. In our study of 15 beggars (respondents) we find that 14 beggars were migrants, all of whom were from rural areas while the remaining one (6.67 per cent) was local person. Of the migrants, 10 were from different villages of Assam while 3 were from the village areas of Bihar and the remaining person came from a village of Uttar Pradesh.

All these beggars reported that they resorted to begging due to economic reasons. But there were certain other reasons in combination with poverty, e.g., physical disability due to sickness, disease or accident, mental deficiency, family disorganization etc.

All types of beggars from able-bodied beggars to religious mendicants are easily noticeable in Greater Guwahati. Sick, physically disabled and child beggars constitute a major part of the beggar population of the city. In our survey, of the total of 20 beggars, 7 were able bodied, 7 were physically handicapped, 5 were sick and disabled and one was a religious mendicant.

There were various modes of begging. Some physically handicapped persons sit on the road-side or in the railway platform, some are taken or rather assisted by women or child beggars who roam from place to place. Sometimes some of these beggars beg by singing some pathetic tales or prayers of God. There are some beggars who are familiarly known throughout certain localities for many years. These are some vagrants who earn

* In our survey population, of the total of 523 earners, 20 were beggars (See Table 2.8).
by displaying snakes, mongoose, monkeys, bears etc. and these animals amuse people by responding to the calls and commands of their masters.

Moreover the beggars suffering from leprosy are commonly seen throughout the city especially in the Paltanbazar, Fancybazar and Pan-bazar areas. Some mentally retarded persons (vagrants) are seen wandering in the city roads who are quite unattached to their surroundings. The number of religious mendicants is not quite negligible in the city. There are several temples in the city where some of such religious mendicants assemble during particular puja festivals. Some others beg from house to house and many givers are found to be attentive to such cases because of their religiosity. Besides these, some of the beggars are found to be fake beggars who wear disguises of fakir, sadhu (i.e. the religious mendicants) etc., or even pose as physically disable or sick.

Generally child, sick and physically disabled beggars draw sympathy from the givers. That is why some children are enforced to this path and some of them, very unfortunately, fall victim to some gang leader's cruelty. Very often, child beggars are members of big families. An elder member of the family usually watches the adventures of the child, unobserved, from a corner.

Beggars are found in different localities of Greater Guwahati. But certain busy localities of the city show the major section of the beggar population. These specific localities are rail-station, bus-stations,
Fancy bazar area, Paltan bazar area, the front of cinema halls of the city and the pavements extending from the Sukreswar temple area to the Machkhowa area.

Beggars of the city like any other city dwell on foot-paths, railway platforms, verandahs of the transportation centres etc. and under the over-bridges during the night-hours. Thus most of the beggars are pavement dwellers while very few live in the slum areas and in the outskirts of the city. Some of them build shanty dwellings at some convenient places, e.g., some shanty dwellings are observed on the riverbank of the Brahmaputra on the area lying between Brahmaputra and Bharalumukh and Machkhowa. These people have to shift to somewhere else, mostly on the footpath during the summer season if the river overflows or if and when the authority demolish their dwelling units. But these people reappear on the scene and prepare shanty-dwellings after sometime.

These beggars manage their food from their meagre daily earning which may be in the form of cash, goods or left over food. A few of them cook on the roadside or in their dwelling places. Very frequently, a section of them is found to grab the stale, thrown away foods either from dustbin or from the backside of hotels, shops etc., or from ceremonial ground while some of them might buy their food from shops or hotels. Sometimes if they are lucky enough they happen to come-across a treat from those people who want to offer food occasionally to beggars because of their religious sentiments or sanctions. Most of the beggars on the foot-paths in front of the Sukreswar temple complex, take their position there because many religious persons,
visiting the temple, quite willingly give them cash, food and cloth generously. Some of the beggars who sat in front of the temple told the author that they have a good time during certain months of the year, viz., from the months of Falguna (February/March) to the month of Bhadra (August/September). Moreover they added that they could expect much from the visitors of the Marwari community who seem to be very generous during religious occasions.

Beggar Problem and Pollution of the city atmosphere:

The beggar population in the city often creates unhygienic atmosphere. They are never aware of their personal cleanliness and eat whatever they can manage. They do their daily chores in the public places creating filthiness in the environment. But the most important aspect from the public health viewpoint is the sick and diseased beggars who roam around the streets of the city, carrying germs of contagious diseases. Among the diseased persons, beggars suffering from leprosy are also found during the course of field observation. Though these people are supposed to be taken care of in charitable leprosy hospitals, a few miles away from the city yet the number of these people seems to never decrease in the city as the author came across many lepers in various localities of the city, who beg in the busy streets of the city or even from house to house.

Beggar Problem and Vices in the city:

While some beggars are caught for stealing, some others are observed to be indulging in some illegal activities during the night. As observed in
the Dainik Asom, the shent-y-dwellings of the river bank of the Brahmaputra in the Machkhova area are inhabited or visited by many suspicious people. Many illegal trades from wine to some immoral trades may be noticed in and around these dwellings. Moreover, it was also observed that some teenager beggar girls roam around the Fancy-bazar streets, rail-station, bus stations etc. whose activities arouse suspicions among the careful observers.

Thus the beggar problem is a complex problem. There is a Vagrants Home in Fatasil for these persons of the city. But it does not serve the actual purpose. Because most of the beggars prefer to roam around the city streets instead of living in the Vagrants Home. According to the Vagrants Home sources, not a single vagrant was brought to this home for the last few years since 1984. Even when some vagrants were brought to this home before 1984, most of them left the Home unnoticed by the authority. Now it is learnt from the same sources that the Vagrants Home will be transformed into a children Home very soon.

Case Studies:
1) Smti Basanti Das, aged 42 years, is a widow, who looks quite capable of doing physical labour. Her husband died 26 years ago. She had to sell her cultivable land first for her husband's Sraddha ceremony and then for her only daughter's marriage ceremony, seven years ago. Now she has none to look after her. So she left her small single-roomed kutcha hut on a tiny

2. Ibid.
plot of land in Chsngsari and came to Guwahati a few years ago. Now she spends most part of the year in Guwahati and sometimes, but rarely, goes to her village house.

Bansanti Das, though a beggar, does not roam around streets or residential areas. She sits in a row at the entrance of the Sukreswar temple with a 'thali' in front of her, like many others in two rows. At night she, along with some others, sleeps in the temple complex, but they are not allowed to step into the verandah of the temple by the temple-priests. However, since she is healthy, she is allowed to spend the night in the temple complex. Other sick and diseased and physically handicapped beggar persons, have to remain on the foot-path in front of the temple at night.

When asked about her income, she informs that generally some of the visitors to the temple give 5 or 10 paise and she can get even a rupee from some generous religious-minded person, though very rarely. Generally, beggars in the complex sit regularly from morning till evening, during the months from February to September in the year. Because excluding a few regular or occasional visitors, other visitors visit the temple during this period. And during such period, visitors become generous and kind to them, as observed by Smti Das and thus beggars in the temple complex do not have to bother about food for most of the time during this period. And during the rest of the period of the year, these beggars have a tough time to manage their food. Some of her fellow beggars beg in the streets and residential areas, but Smti Das says that she cannot do so as she feels humiliated to
do so. As a result, she has to spend many days and nights without food.

2) Shri Dilip Kalita, aged 10 years, begs from door to door. His family consists of six members, viz., his ailing mother, younger brother and sister, aunt and cousin. His mother is too sick to try to earn anything. So he has to take to begging like his aunt, who begs in their locality.

Dilip Kalita's family condition was not so pathetic a few years ago. His father, who was a driver, died of illness and unfortunately his uncle also died in an accident after his father's death. Both of them earned enough for their daily necessities. But they were drunkards so they could never save anything. As a result, within a few months of his uncle's death, his aunt had to come to the street to beg for the family with four young children. In the mean time, Dilip Kalita dropped out of school (he studied up to class I only) and in a very short time took to begging, though quite unwillingly. His ailing mother has been suffering immensely without a single drop of medicine.

3) Sati Charulata, aged around 40 has been suffering from Leprosy. She dwells on pavements — under the overbridge near the Nehru Stadium. Deserted by her relatives because of her illness, she came to the city from her native village in Tihu and began to beg. She usually begs in the nearby residences on Saturday mornings. On other days of the week she begs in the streets. As stated by her, once she was caught by the police, with some other leper-beggars. They were kept in the Leprosy-Home in Boko. But like many others,
she also fled from the Leprosy-Home; because there was the problem of food. Here they are in a better position because many people give them alms here out of sympathy.

4) Smti Kusumi Chakravarty, aged 47 years is a widow who came from a village in Silchar. She stays in the Paltanbazar bus-station and begs from the transport-passengers. She has been living in the bus-station for several years and is quite familiar with most of the regular passengers.

Smti Kusumi Chakravarty met with an accident while travelling in a train and her left hand had to be amputated after the accident. She is often seen in the bus-station, begging from the people, usually pointing at her physical disability.

Smti Kusumi's husband died of chronic illness. She had to mortgage their land and house for her husband's medical treatment. Moreover she had to lose her left hand in the accident. After the death of her husband there was no relative to look after her. So she left her village and came to Guwahati.

Smti Kusumi Chakravarty regrets that she has no children. She thinks that if she had a son, he might not let her to live like this.