

# Homeless Migrants in Mumbai: Life and Labour in Urban Space

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Homeless migrants expose the paradox of urbanisation through the fragmentation and segregation of city spaces. Though invisible, they constitute a considerable size of the population of Mumbai city. Subject to persistent violence, the homeless existence in the city is a case of minimalist citizenship, bereft of the right to the city. Their mere existence on the pavements and streets (as home) is challenged by the growing assertion for the ‘citizen’s right’ over different public spaces such as walkways, pavements and parks. The study proposes to explore questions such as how do the homeless migrants encounter violence and humiliation on an everyday basis? How do they experience the apathy and hostility of the better off classes? What is the nature of politics being played out in the name of ‘local’ versus ‘migrants’ and what kind of insecurity does it create? In addition, the study will analyse the state’s policy on the homeless – their shelter and livelihoods. It is proposed to carry out field investigation in a few locations in Mumbai where homeless migrants are known to reside in large numbers. Recording of lived experiences of a cross-section of the homeless migrants – men and women, workers and non-workers, young and old, and their struggle to lay claim over the tiny spaces that they occupy in the mega city of Mumbai in neoliberal times, will be used as the principal methodology.

## **Who are the Homeless and How They are Treated by the Neoliberal City?**

Homelessness or Houselessness is a particular type of physical condition; the experiences of people under this condition are different depending on their social (dis)location. In common parlance, homelessness means person not having a home to stay or the one who spent his/her night on streets. The Census of India defines ‘houseless people’ – as persons who are not living in ‘census houses.’ The latter refers to ‘a structure with roof.’ The United Nations, in 1999, interpreted homeless as including *“those sleeping without shelter, in constructions not meant for habitation and in welfare institutions.”* The majority of homeless in India are found living in places such as roadsides, pavements, drainage pipes, under staircases, or in the open, temple-mandaps, platforms and the like’ (Census of India, 1991: 64)<sup>1</sup>. Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan defines a homeless person as “a person who has no place to call a home in the city. By home is meant a place which not only provides a shelter but takes care of one’s health, social, cultural and economic needs. Home provides a holistic care and security”. The most challenging part of being homeless is not just home it is rather not having value of life, loss of dignity and everyday exploitation that they face by general public, police and the laws which make them more vulnerable. Waldron (1991)<sup>2</sup> states that the condition of being homeless in entrepreneurial, neoliberal cities in current times is simply a matter of not having any place to call one’s own.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaudhary, Shivani, Amita Joseph and Indu Prakash Singh. 2008, Homeless Women and Violence, IGSSS, Study on Delhi’s Homeless (NGO Report).

<sup>2</sup> Waldron, J. 1991. Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom, UCLA Law Review, Vol. 39, pp 295-324, USA

The National Campaign for Housing Rights uses a broad, holistic, definition of home as a place where one is “able to live with dignity in social, legal and environmental security and with adequate access to essential housing resources like land, building materials, water, fuel, fodder as well as civic services and finance”. According to Speak and Tipple (2006)<sup>3</sup>, “While industrialised nations regard inadequate housing as almost synonymous with homelessness, this congruence may be unhelpful in developing countries in which a large proportion of households live in housing which could be defined as inadequate”. The Supreme Court in *Chameli Singh and Others vs. State of Uttar Pradesh Case (1996)* has observed, “Shelter for human being, therefore, is not mere protection of his life and limb. It is however where he has opportunities to grow physically, mentally, intellectually and spiritually. Right to shelter, therefore, include living space, safe and decent structure, clean and decent surrounding, sufficient light, air and water, electricity, sanitation, and other civic amenities like roads etc, so as to have easy access to his daily avocation. The right to shelter therefore does not mean a mere right to a roof over one’s head but right to the entire infrastructure necessary to enable them to live and develop as human being. Right to shelter when used as an essential requisite to the right to live should be deemed to have been guaranteed as a fundamental right...” (Ramanathan, 2008)<sup>4</sup>

Studies show people (read migrants) come to cities as last resort due to a variety of reasons – poverty, unemployment, destitution, heavy debt, atrocities, communal violence, drought, floods, cyclone, earthquake, displacement due to development projects, etc. Despite the fact that almost every year, millions of migrant workers come to the cities which offer work opportunities in the unorganized sector, the city planning essentially overlooks the question of providing housing to the low income groups or ensuring affordable rental housing in the cities that attract migrant workers. In Mumbai, it is estimated that about 1.5 lakh people are staying as homeless without any recourse to housing<sup>5</sup>. In a society that places value on the concept of home and devotes much attention to housing, this neglect is startling.

One needs to acknowledge and appreciate the fact that the homeless are productive residents who labour for their survival – they are the 'city makers' who play a critical role in sustaining the city (IGSSS 2012)<sup>6</sup>. Rather than being recognised for their contribution to the city, the homeless migrants are being treated as the 'other'; the 'criminals'; the 'beggars'; the 'outcast'; the 'unclean' (ibid). Why and when the toiling/labouring migrants become 'other' will be an important exploration.

The migrants start and in most situations continue as homeless and live a life of deprivation, dislocation and therefore disoriented and disenfranchised. They are perhaps the most faceless, voiceless and invisible group in a city’s populace. Middle class worldviews tend to de-legitimate lifestyles associated with lower class life worlds, rendering “the poor” strange and distant (Veness 1993)<sup>7</sup>. The sight of the poor and homeless in contemporary times in a city like Mumbai is no longer seen with sympathy; the uppish middle class population – earlier dwelling on progressive thoughts and carrying

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<sup>3</sup> Speak, S. & Tipple, G. 2006. Perceptions, Persecution and Pity: The Limitations of Interventions for Homelessness in Developing Countries. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 172-188.

<sup>4</sup> Ramanathan, U. 2008. Ostensible Poverty, Beggary and the Law. *Economic and Political Weekly*, pp. 33-44.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/homeless-in-a-wet-city/article4989176.ece>. Although officially, the census figures put the homeless population to be 35,408, civil society organizations deride this conclusion and claim that about 1.5 lakh people in the city are living as homeless.

<sup>6</sup> Indo-Global Social Service Society. 2012. *The Unsung City Makers. The Unsung City Makers: A Study of the Homeless Residents of Delhi*.

<sup>7</sup> Veness, April. 1993. 'Neither homed or homeless: Contested definitions and the personal worlds of the poor' *Political Geography* 12 (14): 319-340

apology of denying justice to the poor – have not only become nonchalant enough to shun the homeless but even contribute in making strategies – legal or non-legal – to prove the latter’s right over the urban space as illegal (Bannerjee-Guha)<sup>8</sup>. In order to use its 'infrastructural power' (Mann 1993)<sup>9</sup>, modern states embrace their ‘own’ subjects and exclude ‘unwanted’ others. Parsell (2010)<sup>10</sup> discusses an interesting theory about how homeless people are viewed in this society. In his article ‘Homeless is what I am, not who I am?’ he argues that the past literature on homelessness had been placing too much emphasis on defining the characteristics of people, who are homeless. They are not only defined as the ‘other’ based on what they lack, but also ‘they have become depersonalised.’

Contemporary urban landscapes feature the cohabitation of people living in poverty and those situated within more affluent circumstances (WHO 2010). Geographers have emphasised upon the reality of increasing divisions between enfranchised and disenfranchised groups in contemporary urban landscapes (Cumbers, Helms and Swanson 2010<sup>11</sup>). These divisions can be understood and realised within the contexts of rising urbanization, economic and spatial restructuring of cities through heightened investments in infrastructure and reforms in urban services and governance that have substantially altered the prospects of the hitherto excluded groups in accessing the city in India. Besides, these contexts have created several new categories of vulnerable and excluded groups. The urban reform agenda along with other neo-liberal developments has restricted access to services, work spaces, social welfare and participation that can undermine the overall existence and of these groups and their access to cities. Terms used to invoke such heterogeneous groups (who nonetheless defy easy classification) include the “unsavable”, “undeserving”, “unhomed”, “deviant”, “disruptive”, “poor” or “outcasts” (Mayhew 1861; Shubin 2011; Veness 1993 referred in Hodgetts et al 2012<sup>12</sup>). Whatever might be the classificatory explanation, majority of them belong to migrant population in the city space.

An important area of exploration of the field work would be to understand the kind of social relations that are allowed or restricted by current lived spaces of the homeless – relations at the place of living within and outside family in terms of age, sex, and other bio-divisions, at the work place and possibly in the form of connectedness with the origin. These social relations are formed in the process of production and reproduction at three, inter-related levels under ‘modern’ neo-capitalism: biological reproduction (the family), the reproduction of labour power (the working class per se) and the reproduction of social relations of production (constitutive of capitalism) (Lefebvre, 1991)<sup>13</sup>. Further exploration is needed to understand the interconnectedness of the three and how that shapes the lived experiences of the homeless migrants in Mumbai.

## **Do the Homeless Migrants Matter to the State?**

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<sup>8</sup> Banerjee-Guha, Swapna. Homeless in Neoliberal Cities: View from Mumbai. [www.udri.org/udri/mumbaireader](http://www.udri.org/udri/mumbaireader)

<sup>9</sup> Mann, Michael. 1993. *The Sources of Social Power. Vol 2: The Rise of Classes and Nation States, 1760-1914*. New York: Cambridge University Press. P. 60.

<sup>10</sup> Parsell, C. 2010. “Homeless is what I am, not who I am”: Insights from an inner-city Brisbane study’. *Urban Policy and Research* 28(2): 181-194.

<sup>11</sup> Cumbers: Andrew, Gesa Helms and Kate Swanson. 2010. Class, Agency and Resistance in the Old Industrial City. *Antipode* Volume 42, Issue 1, pages 46–73.

<sup>12</sup> Hodgetts, D. J., Stolte, O., Chamberlain, K., Radley, A., Groot, S., & Nikora, L. W. 2010. The mobile hermit and the city: Considering links between places, objects, and identities in social psychological research on homelessness. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 49(2), 285-303.

<sup>13</sup> Lefebvre, Henry. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell

Following the wave of economic globalisation, cities like Mumbai have become more interested in wooing the real estate magnates and builders to redevelop slums and dilapidated open spaces on a commercial basis to transform the face of the 'urban' altogether (Bannerjee-Guha)<sup>14</sup>. The mega infrastructural and commercial/residential projects are planned and implemented in a gigantic manner. All open spaces, slums, low income housing areas, at times, middle class areas also are getting appropriated by the above design of ushering in an era of a global 'urban' that happens to be much more complex than before. As a natural outcome, the number of urban homeless is found to have been increasing with a concomitant withdrawal of State from generating employment, providing housing and services for many.

The processes of governance in Mumbai have witnessed a substantive shifts in last few decades that could be understood through the decisions of instituting restrictive rights over its space, by legitimising the denial of rights of many for favouring the aggrandisement of the excessive rights of a few. Consideration of basic necessities for the poor, such as, shelter, transport, water and sanitation, employment opportunities, etc. which since long have been a structural part of a welfare state, get de-prioritised in the urban planning agenda, skillfully armed with postmodern methodologies like 'participatory planning' or 'public forum' and terms like 'visibility' or 'transparency' as key instruments of capture and penetration (Benjamin, 2010<sup>15</sup>). Thus, access to housing or lack of it is one of the most significant markers of life and circumstances for people in the city of Mumbai.

The state's attitude towards the homeless is a classic case of statecraft – invisibilise them when they have to be counted, illegalise them when services are demanded by/for them, and evict them when the clamour for making the core of the city 'Shanghai' is pitched high. Furthermore, it remains a puzzle as to why the state does not use care, compassion, and empathy as the technology of rule in case of the homeless. The overwhelming presence of the state agencies such as police, magistrates and civic bodies (Bombay Municipal Corporation, Navi Mumbai Municipal Corporation, etc.) makes the migrants' everyday experiences precarious and undignified.

There have been shifts in policies and practices that put the homeless migrants on the threshold of security/insecurity, legality/illegality, insider/outsider and wanted/unwanted, etc.; and their experiences of accessing or inability to access services of the state revolves around the strength and limits of their citizenship emanating from identity proof or lack of it. A careful look at the policy for the homeless reveals that instead of prioritizing necessary provisions for shelter, a number of new laws have been introduced and old laws strengthened for tightening surveillance over this group. According to Harvey (1989<sup>16</sup>), surveillance laws are meant to destroy the organic relationship between people (especially the poor) and space. These punitive laws look at the poor as a specific socio-economic class and are used as weapons of class war against them. The bifurcation of landscape is a common trend in any place. The policy makers have been bifurcating city spaces based on various layers such as rich, middle, and poor classes. De Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, shows how subjects make room for themselves in urban spaces which are over-determined by maps, plans, rules, codes and schemes. New governmental techniques such as Aadhar Card and migrant card may create further barriers in naturalisation of a

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<sup>14</sup> op.cit.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin, S. 2010. 'Manufacturing Neoliberalism: Lifestyling Indian Urbanity' in S. Banerjee-Guha (ed.), *Accumulation by Dispossession: Transformative Cities in the New Global Order*, pp 92-194, Sage, New Delhi.

<sup>16</sup> Harvey, D. 1989. 'From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism', *Geografiska Annaler, Series B and Human Geography*, Vol 71(1), pp 3-17, UK

migrant and homeless in their claim over the city. Moreover, a migrant card is likely to impose upon them an identity that of a transitory or temporary resident, and any effort for naturalisation will be mired in bureaucratic technicalities, thereby blurring the difference between a migrant and an immigrant.

### **Politics of the ‘Other’ and State’s Complicity**

However, inhospitality for the urban poor is frequently politicised as open aggression against the ‘non-locals’, the migrants from UP and Bihar living in Mumbai. Their vulnerability is further exposed as they helplessly watch their identity devalued and hurt, in addition to physical harm and losses. Physical attacks and public humiliation based on sub-nationality, the ‘Other’, is often analysed as tactical ammunition selectively used in the electoral polity. Such analyses fail to see the role of the market (capital) and state’s complicity in such attacks, as the new vision of urbanism demands a particular control over the labouring bodies and habitation patterns. The city’s municipal administration welcomes migrants but of middle class origin, who are harbingers of the new urban culture of consumption and leisure, and purchase several services from the market. The labouring bodies, on the contrary, just subsist as they try to save as much to repatriate money to far away homes, demand all sorts of services, and with little money to spend on housing can only squat. The labouring bodies must be procured through labour mates, wherever possible housed in shanties near the work sites and completely controlled. No surprise that new corporate agencies in the business of supplying labour have started appearing. Such institutionalisation of labour migration would not only help exercise control over the labour but would also limit the scope for the labour to inhabit the city beyond the project. Market fears the urban poor and counters this fear by constantly keeping them insecure. Parties strategically exploiting the sentiments of local versus the migrant serve the market and the state as much if not more than they serve their own interests.

### **Whither Housing Rights in a Neoliberal City?**

The study of the homeless poses a number of dilemmas to the mobilisers of housing rights. Should pavement dwelling be claimed as a right? Can the rights framework steer the claim-making by the migrants, including the homeless and the squatters, to their substantive participation in the city governance and appropriation of spaces? An alternative political position would view surviving on unliveable spaces like pavements as a humanitarian emergency. Dwelling on a pavement or such places like road dividers, drainage side, sewerage pipes, public parks, temple premises cannot protect or give dignity as it neither provides privacy, safety (from violence, brutalisation), security (emotional), freedom (from the sense of embarrassment, shame, guilt and unworthiness), protection (from the vagaries of the nature), environmental sanitation, services, storage, etc. nor it can ensure a space that is legally sanctified, that allows safeguard from uncertainties, that serves as social insurance, and one that gives a bonafide identity. Under the modern state, existence of a body, that too from an ‘underclass’ more often than not evokes suspicion, anxiety and scare, and calls for action to contain, control or decimate it. A body has to be bonafide for which it needs testimonial in the form of a verifiable address that, in turn, requires proof of a house (owned or rented), along with lineage, certificates, i-cards or utility bills. The state negotiates with a body through these identifiers (physical but growingly digital). Lack of housing denies the basic identifier, hence illegalises the homeless and brutalise them. Above all, this pushes the homeless further into disenfranchisement despite a liberal democratic set up. Even the rhetoric or pretensions of participation and inclusion eludes them. Of course, this is not an argument

for depriving a homeless even from their existing (sub-human) places of living without arranging an alternative, an adequate house. But humanitarian emergencies are not to be glorified and subhuman survival converted into right. Rights have to be morally justifiable too.

The neo-liberal cities must attempt to follow standards, aspirations and consumption patterns of 'global' cities. The city is re-imagined as business city, consumption city, uptown working city, leisure and recreation city, clean city – all encapsulated in an image of a glamour city. On the contrary, the homeless is an embodiment of suppressed city aspirations, belonging to the workers city – harsh, labouring, subsisting, dingy and grimly – spatially spread all across the city. The suppressed aspirations get integrated into their everyday routine experiences of living. The framework of right to the city serves to explain the irreconcilable contradictions inherent in the two aspirations, exacerbation of social inequality and urban unrest.

The rights framework has clearly challenged the assumption of neoliberals linking growth, social equality and social justice (including housing rights). The main plank of this assumption – inclusive city – has been punctured by the experiences of the homeless migrants. Fuelled by a sky rocketing real estate business, spatial segregation has got big push from neoliberal urban planning. Rapid changes have been forced in the city landscapes to mould it into the new urban visions. Effective policing at key spaces to keep the homeless away and continued peripheralisation of the urban poor, particularly the migrants, has hardly left any scope for pretensions of inclusive city. Two body cities intertwined with two spatial cities have sprawled at the same time.

However, the praxology of the rights discourse raises the serious doubts whether it can really lead to achieving the right to the city for the homeless in the present economic dispensation. Though housing right has emerged as a major issue of social justice in neoliberalising cities, the overall dynamics of socio-spatial change in the city lopsidedly in the favour of capital explains the decline of the housing rights movement in the last three decades or so. The socio-spatial impact of neoliberalism on urban policy has been unprecedented and manifold: a) cities have emerged as the key spatial sites in the global economy; b) there is multi-scaling of urban governance as several local, regional, national and international (bi-lateral, multi-lateral official agencies and powerful multinational corporations) work in an ensemble of a complex system; c) realignment of city authorities with the powerful business interests (further strengthened by the new powerful *mantra* of public-private partnership); d) restructuring and deregulation of labour markets; and e) privatisation of several basic services and pushing up the cost of access to both public and private services. Dispossession of the urban poor from the home, property and livelihoods is taking place on unprecedented scale. All these have further marginalised the voice of the poor, migrant and homeless sections of the urban populace. Where is the scope left for participation in decision-making and appropriation of spaces? It is not surprising that housing rights is often reduced to resettlement rights.

And finally, borrowing from Lefebvre, is it possible to realise the housing right for the homeless without assigning the central role to the working class? “Only the working class can become the agent, the social carrier or support of this realisation” (Lefebvre 1996)<sup>17</sup>. In the Indian context, the city homeless migrants in Mumbai are the informal workers – casual/contract workers, own account workers or a mix – who experience the deep misery of everyday life with least or nil care and support

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<sup>17</sup> Lefebvre, Henry. 1996. *Writings on Cities*. Cambridge: Blackwell.

of the state and the market. Can housing rights be realised without the resurgence of the working class movement – a new movement riding on the strength of the informal workers?

The field work is expected to provide some answers to these questions.