POVERTY AND THE NEVER ENDING FIGHT FOR HEALTH AND HYGIENE OF HOMELESS BEGGARS NEAR THE SUKRESWAR TEMPLE, GUWAHATI: A STUDY

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Abstract

According to the World Bank, ‘Poverty is pronounced deprivation in well-being’. This precise definition of poverty brings another question as to what does well-being stand for. Well-being may be described as the command over commodities, over resources or the accessibility of basic necessities of life. The day to day needs of human beings are wide and it only grows but never comes to an end. Poverty may be tied to a specific type of consumption; for example, people could be house poor or food poor or health poor. The homeless beggars are the people living in the most disadvantageous position. Their survival and well-being is completely dependent on the mercy of others. Even for their basic two time daily meal they wait for the sympathy of the passersby’s.

Hygiene is a set of practices performed for the preservation of health. On a day to day basis people are exposed to things like dust, smoke, pollution, bacteria, traffic fuels etc. Hence it is necessary to maintain a good personal hygiene in order to be better equipped to fight diseases and illness. However, maintaining good hygiene can be a big challenge for the poor or rather for the people living in a situation of extreme poverty. Beggary is such an extreme situation of poverty wherein a person appeals to others for the material help by word or gestures. For the people affected by severe poverty, health situations are greatly compromised because of inadequate sanitation and hygiene. Demands for safe and adequate drinking water, pakka dwellings for the poor, proper latrine facilities are often been raised and even a lot of stress is been made on these issues whether by government, Civil Society Organisations or by public spirited individuals. But what about the health and hygiene conditions of those who are not privileged enough to have a roof over their head. This paper makes a study on the homeless beggars who have settled in the pavements near the Sukreswar Temple, Guwahati. They are the people who live at the mercy of others even for
their meal. So are the authorities being able to pay importance to the sanitary needs of these homeless beggars? In this study interview method will be used wherein self structured questions will be asked to the beggars found near the Sukreswar Temple for data collection.

The main objective of this paper is to identify the link between poverty, good health and economic development. Further, the researchers will also try to suggest some possible steps that can be taken to fill the gap of inadequacy of the health and hygiene initiatives taken by government.

**Key Words**
Health, Hygiene, Beggars, Sukreswar Temple, Sanitation

1.1 Introduction

‘You can be extremely poor but extremely clean’. Poverty is often associated with dirt and unhygienic conditions of living. Poor people are often the most deprived sections of our society and are unable to afford basic equipments of sanitation. Conditions of personal hygiene are like a criterion to determine the socio-economic condition of the concerned person. Many a time we do judge people on the basis of their physical appearance, complexion or attire.

The question that arises is how the poor people can maintain good personal hygiene without access to clean piped water, personal toilets or other basic sanitary needs .The beggars who are informally settled near the Sukreswar temple are the ones living in a situation of extreme poverty without access to basic sanitary needs. They often use public toilets that are shared by many and not properly maintained. Where people from the developed nations like USA are facilitated with too many public toilets, toilet finder apps; it is still rare to find a well-maintained public toilet in Guwahati. In the absence of these basic needs people are left with no other option but to pee in empty plots, near the footpath or in the cornered places. These unsanitary habits pollute the soil and environment causing discomfort for the passersby. Health complications like prostate gland or diabetic patients are required to visit the toilet too often; however, in the absence of proper public toilets made available to them people purposely ignore the big ‘do not pee here’ notices.

The beggars, who are always in search of crowded places so that they can gain the sympathy of more public and earn more; often sit in unhygienic and dirty places, near dustbins etc. to attract people’s attention and get more money. Hygiene standards or unpolluted place of living is the last thing that bothers the beggars. The poor, unsheltered
beggars sitting or informally settling near the Sukreswar temple, Guwahati too are less bothered about sanitation or maintaining a basic standard of health.

Do the government policies spreading to the rural as well as urban places also cover the unsheltered beggars? Do the garbage collectors of GMC also collect garbage from the beggars?

1.2 Nexus between poverty, inequality and economic growth

Any discussion on beggary is closely related to the problem of poverty. It is well recognised that the avowed objectives of our social planners immediately after independence of our country were the ending of poverty, ignorance and the inequality of opportunities. The problem of beggary is so wide that it is very hard to give specific reasons for the organization of beggary. The standard of living of the beggars is too poor to have access to safe food and water, clothing, shelter and basic medical care in order to live well- indeed, in order to live at all.¹ Another debate that relates to poverty is ‘whether freedom from poverty is a human right?’

Human beings are physical beings who need access to food, drinking water, clothing, shelter, education and health. Under Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care. People living in severe poverty lack secure access to sufficient quantities of these basic necessities. Therefore it is not possible for them to enjoy the basic necessities of life recognised by the various international, national or regional instruments. The problem of inaccessibility of basic necessities of life is mainly associated with the poor and therefore we can say that poverty is definitely a violation of human rights.²

In *Indra Sawhney v Union of India*³, the Supreme Court of India observed that in order to eradicate poverty, it is necessary to ensure free medical care, education and access to employment, housing, land reforms and free water in order to eliminate inequalities.

Poverty is a complex situation and it is often very difficult to come out of this situation. Children and grandchildren of the rich will largely replace their parents and grandparents in

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the steep economic ladder, as much as children and grandchildren of the poor will remain impoverished, regardless of their potential and hard work. As Byanyima observes, “A child born to a rich family, even in the poorest countries, will go to the best school and will receive the highest quality care if they are sick. At the same time, poor families will see their children taken away from them, struck down by easily preventable diseases because they do not have the money to pay for treatment.”

The poor beggars who have settled near the Sukreswar temple are not engaged into any decent employment. Their life starts and ends in satisfying their basic needs for food, clothing and shelter. This so called life of the beggars is not contributing anything positive to our society or to the country’s economy. Again, poor people are exposed to more deceases and health complications due to lack of access or awareness about better medical care. When a person is physically and mentally not fit he cannot perform his job effectively and it has a negative impact on the economy of the country as well as of the industry. Therefore the concepts of poverty and inequality are directly linked with the economy of the concerned country.

1.3 Reasons for beggary

Beggary, at the present time has turned into a profession of earning easy money. Economic reasons like poverty of the family, unemployment, economic crisis etc. often compels people to beg. Beggary sometimes also results from social causes like family disorganization, lack of parental control, disorganized communities, breaking joint family system and social custom. Beggary is not just an option for earning easy money; but sometimes it is a compulsion. Biological reasons like illness, physical or mental disability and old age are some of the other reasons that produces beggars. The beggars near the Sukreswar temple, who is the subject of this paper, too were compelled by few of the above mentioned reasons.

1.4 Reason for selecting the Sukreswar temple for this paper

Sukreswar temple is one of the most beautiful and famous temples of Lord Shiva which is located at the ghats of the mighty Bhramaputra. The Sukreswar temple, which is located on the Sukreswar or the Itakhuli Hill on the south bank of river Brahmaputra in the Panbazar locality of Guwahati city.

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6. Sukreswar temple is located on the Sukreswar or the Itakhuli Hill on the south bank of river Brahmaputra in the Panbazar locality of Guwahati city.
dedicated to Lord Shiva dates back to the 18th century. It was constructed by the Ahom king Pramatta Singha in the year 1744. The premises of this temple also have a Vishnu temple and many other complexes and halls that are used by people for conducting marriages, pujas or post death rituals etc. Sukreswar temple is known to have one of the largest Shivalingas in India.7

The beggars settled near the Sukreswar temple are selected for analysing the hygiene situations of the people living in an extreme situation of poverty. The homeless beggars who are temporarily settled in the pavements of the temple have been living on the mercy of those pedestrians who use the footpath opposite the historic Sukreswar temple in Panbazar area. Each pavement dweller has a painful story to tell. There age, gender or stories might not be similar; but the pain and helplessness is all same.

The un-hygienic living condition and ignorance about the importance of sanitation is clearly visible when we look at the beggars. A clean and healthy India is possible only when every single individual residing within its territorial jurisdiction is encouraged to stay clean, eat healthy and live fit. Writing this paper was a great experience as it gave us the opportunity to talk to them in person, learn about their lifestyle, their problems and to tell them about the importance of hygiene in our lives.

1.5 Data Collection

For the purpose of data collection the researchers went to the Sukreswar temple, Guwahati to enquire about the living condition of the beggars settled near the temple. A total of about 35 beggars of different age groups were questioned and their responses were noted down. The self structured questionnaire contained the following questions and the responses that we got are put in the four columns (namely response 1, response 2, response 3 and response 4). Further the researchers also tried to specify (in brackets) the percentage of people under each response. The data collected while writing this paper is put in table no 1.1 to make it easy to understand.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Response 1</th>
<th>Response 2</th>
<th>Response 3</th>
<th>Response 4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Do they stay there or leave at night?</td>
<td>Yes (65.7%)</td>
<td>No (5.7 %)</td>
<td>Sometimes move to other</td>
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<td>2. For how long have they stayed there?</td>
<td>0-5 years (54.3%)</td>
<td>5-10 years (34.3%)</td>
<td>10-15 years (8.6%)</td>
<td>More than that (2.8%)</td>
</tr>
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<td>3. Why they started begging?</td>
<td>Family issues (60%)</td>
<td>They started begging since childhood with parents (25.7%)</td>
<td>Never thought of any other occupation (11.42%)</td>
<td>Not known (2.8%)</td>
</tr>
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<td>4. From where do they get water?</td>
<td>Sometimes from the panbazar pani tenky</td>
<td>Sometimes from the temple</td>
<td>Sometimes from the pipe</td>
<td>From the nearby public</td>
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<td>5. Where and what do they eat?</td>
<td>Some of them have their own arrangements</td>
<td>Often people donate food</td>
<td>Sometimes get the leftovers of the functions organised in the temple</td>
<td>Sometimes sleep without having anything</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Where do they get soap for bathing, washing clothes and utensils?</td>
<td>Sometimes buy it from a nearby shop</td>
<td>But rarely use it</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Have the Govt. or any NGO providing them any help?</td>
<td>In winters they get blankets form NGOs.</td>
<td>Sometimes people come and donate used cloths.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. What do they do upon falling sick?</td>
<td>They visit the nearby MMC hospital</td>
<td>Though the treatment is free, they hardly get the prescribed medicines from the hospital authorities</td>
<td>The hospital authorities make the excuse that stock of the prescribed medicines is over</td>
<td>They often ignore minor diseases like fever, cold etc.</td>
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<td>9. Where do they dispose of their garbage? Does the GMC provide any help for that?</td>
<td>They keep it near the footpath and the garbage collectors collect it from there</td>
<td>The garbage collectors never demand any money for this help</td>
<td>However, as they are not provided with any covered dustbins, the garbage often makes the place look dirty</td>
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<td>10. What sort of toilet do they use?</td>
<td>Sometimes they use the toilet of the temple itself</td>
<td>Sometimes they use the public toilet where they are supposed to pay rupees 5 for one use</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Do they keep their children clean by regular baths and do they themselves take regular baths?</td>
<td>Some of them said that they keep their kids clean by regular baths</td>
<td>However, the children too were seen wearing dirty cloths, long nails, messy hair</td>
<td>Children were uneducated, untidy and had no dream about the future</td>
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<td>12. It’s very essential to keep the legs clean as those are the easiest entry for diseases. Do they realise this fact and have they been working upon it and if so, how?</td>
<td>They are aware about the fact that personal hygiene is necessary in order to prevent the spread of diseases but are least interested to maintain</td>
<td>Their day starts with the search for two time meal and ends with a sound sleep. Hygiene has no importance in their lives and were also not</td>
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</table>
On being asked whether they stay there or not, about 65.7% of them turned out to be the ones who stay there and do not move to other places. While around 5.7% of them do not stay there and 20% of them were the ones who often move to other places, especially to the nearby railway station. They have been staying there for many years and have made temporary arrangements for cooking and sleeping.

However, when it rains, they face problem as they do not have roofs over the place they dwell. So they wrap their belongings with polythene and move to the mandir to take cover from the rain.

However they don’t face any problem as regards regular water to be used for personal purposes for the simple reason that they can easily carry water from the nearby Panbazar water reservoir and can also use water of the temple. They also have been using the leaks in the water supply pipes for bathing and other purposes. They also use this water for drinking. So the quality of that water cannot be assured of hygiene.

When I asked them about the hygiene standards, the response was not satisfactory. Some of them said without hesitation that they take bath in 2-3 days gap. They do buy soap from a nearby shop and use it sometimes. However, their dirty legs and clothes, untidy beds showed the actual situation of their hygiene.

Though they get water free of cost and their garbage is also taken by the GMC garbage collectors free of cost, when they fall sick, they do not get medicines that easily. They are supposed to get free treatment in the govt hospitals and also the medicines are to be provided to them free of cost. However, when they actually go to the govt hospitals only few of the medicines are provided to them and the hospital authorities make the excuse that stock of the prescribed medicines is over.

When I enquired about the kind of toilets they use, they said that sometimes they use the toilet of the temple and also the public toilet of panbazar. They are supposed to pay rupees 5 when they use the public toilet.

When I enquired about the kind of hygiene standards that they maintain for their kids, they said that they try to keep their kids clean. But I saw their children also wearing dirty
cloths, with long nails and messy hair. Children too were uneducated, untidy and had no dreams about the future.

The standard of hygiene, sanitation and the desire to stay fit and healthy was not at all satisfactory.

1.6 Observation

Whenever we pass by the temple we see people staring at the beggars, covering their nose and ignoring the fact that these beggars are too poor to maintain basic hygiene standards. Their dirty legs and un-showered body, clothes that are rarely washed, blankets full of flies brings only one question in my mind ‘Why do we ignore their sanitary needs?’ This paper would be successful if it can even make one person to realise the fact that streets are for the public. You may pee and go away, but unfortunately it may be the place where a beggar has temporarily/permanently settled along with the family. The family might be inhaling the smell or sleeping with the germs for the whole day. Well maintained public toilets must be established in short distances and people should be made aware of the evils of unsanitary habits. The helplessness of these uneducated, poor and deprived beggars must be considered while introducing or revamping welfare schemes. Equality as enshrined in Article 14\(^8\) of the Constitution of India is possible only when the deprived sections of our society are given special benefits and positives steps are taken by the government to uplift their status and bring them on an equal footing with the public. The hygiene needs of these beggars should be given a little more importance and every possible step must be taken for their betterment.

1.7 Conclusion

The effects of street beggars cannot be overemphasised. Beggars tend to present a negative image of a particular location. It also leaves a negative impact in the minds of the tourists about a particular area. The ill effects of beggary cannot be enlisted. The unhygienic living condition of beggars brings health risks as many of them can transmit infectious diseases in society. Beggars also attract others to start begging because it is the ultimate destination for earning easy money. India is a land of different religions and the practices of

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8. Article 14 of the Constitution of India provides, “The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India”.

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almost every religion emphasises on giving. Hence living at the mercy of others is not at all difficult in a country like ours.9

Beggary and the resulting poverty is definitely a big concern for the government as well as for the common people. Eradication of this practice is of utmost importance in order to ensure them a dignified life. However, beggary cannot be undone over night. Sincere efforts and concern of the authorities as well as of the masses and an atmosphere where people can work in unity is necessary. But till the time it exists, the authorities must take steps to educate them about hygiene and sanitation, welfare schemes should be introduced in such a manner that can easily take the benefits. Beggars too are human beings and hence should be encouraged to dream and work in a constructive manner to make these dreams a reality. A prosperous and developed India is not just the dream of our Government, but of every one of us, including the homeless beggars.

This is the plight of the people dwelling in footpaths, without any boundary, privacy or security. So can we term it as brotherhood/sisterhood that our Constitution solemnly envisages through the word “fraternity”? Or is it the negligence of the concerned authorities?
The footpath dwellers near the Sukreshwar Temple holding a placard which says “MUCH LIKE CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME, SANITATION AND HYGIENE STARTS FROM YOU AND ME.”
A life without hope and dreams, and the confused look in the little girl’s face, says a lot about the plight of the footpath dwellers near the Sukreshwar Temple.
It can be assumed that this person has taken up the look of a Babaji to earn more sympathy than others from the religious fanatics of the Indian society in terms of monetary gain.
On this particular day, there was no one to provide them with food, and so, at around 4 pm, the mother started preparing dinner with her elder daughter playing in the background and the little one having a nap.
The mother preparing dinner on a temporary stove in the footpath in the midst of all the dust paving in from the passerby’s as well as the vehicles, and that too without a lid to cover up the vessel.
Rice boiling in a kitchen set up over the footpath, their elder daughter drinking water in an uncovered bowl and in the back her mother checking if her 2 months old baby is sleeping properly under that pink mosquito net.
The researcher enquiring about the living conditions and problems faced by the beggars