

**A micro qualitative study  
of child beggars in three cross-roads of South and  
Central Delhi**

**Butterflies, Programme of Street & Working Children  
New Delhi, India**

**A report from Documentation Research and Advocacy Centre  
Butterflies, New Delhi**

*Researched by*  
**Vandana Chaudhry & Priya Varadan**

## Forward :

Last December 1998 a leading national English Newspaper carried a news item which stated that the Juvenile Welfare Board has ordered the five voluntary organisations implementing the Childline services in Delhi, to round up all child beggars and produce them before the Juvenile Welfare Board by March 31st 1999.

This news item and later the receipt of the order by the five voluntary organisations created quite a furore. The five organisations objected to the manner in which Juvenile Welfare Board seem to want to clean up the streets of Delhi of child beggars while keeping the best interest of the child in focus.

Since then the issue of beggars has been discussed at different fora and written about in the print media.

In July of this year Bal Adhikar Manch organised a one day consultation on the issue of beggars in Delhi-especially child beggars. Butterflies participated in the same.

We at Butterflies had an in-house discussion on it and decided that although there are number of studies about the beggar problem, most of them were quantitative and there was a need to do a micro qualitative study.

We felt there is a need to understand the compulsions that push an individual to beg. It is also important to know the person behind the stretched hand. Who is she or he ? What is her history ? It is so easy for the educated class to dismiss them off as lazy, losers and dropouts of society. Some of them are also viewed as criminals, perhaps some are into criminal activities but that should not jaundice our views regarding all of them. No person is born a thief, destitute or homeless. It is situations and circumstances that push individual to the edge. In majority of the instances begging is the only source of income. Eleven years ago when I did a study on "Situational Analysis of Street and Working Children in Delhi", I had noted that large numbers of persons from neighbouring states and districts such as Meerut, Aligarh, Allahabad took trains to Delhi on Tuesday, so as to beg at the Hanuman Mandir at Connaught Place. They mentioned that they collected enough

of dry rations and money to last them a week. It was shocking to realise the depths of poverty that forced people to travel long distances to a sacred place so as to get alms from devotees.

This brings us to the question of "giving alms" to poor to gain merits in the next life. On one hand we condone giving alms, as it appeases our conscious but on the other hand look down upon the poor, beggar and would be relieved if they were removed from the streets.

It is this contradiction, that has resulted in half-hearted attempts to solve this problem.

A key principle of social development is that people have to be taken into confidence and the planning process has to have the active participation of the target group/population. In the case of beggars, they are very rarely consulted.

This study is a small attempt to seek answers from the young girls and children what alternatives do they perceive to begging.

Vandana Choudhury and Priya Vardan through their study has given us an insight into eight beggars lives. They have written the case studies with deep sensitivity and thereby giving dignity to each one of them. Vandana and Priya were touched and humbled by their interactions with these marginalised people. For both of them, this was the first time they had done research. This experience has deepened their interest in research and hope in future to do more of such micro studies.

*Rita Panicker  
August 1999*

## Preface :

Lack of rural development, unplanned urbanisation has given rise to many problems in today's society. And one such problem is beggary. Thousands migrate from villages to towns, towns to cities etc., in search of better living standards and a decent livelihood. Most of them being unskilled, illiterate finding an employment in cities and metros becomes impossible. The next alternative is to find a labour intensive job, when that too is not easy to find, they take to begging to sustain themselves. Of course there are many who take to begging at the very first instance, since it is an easy way out.

[Beggary and begging is not merely an act of outstretching of arms for alms. There are several factors, dimensions, ramifications etc. that goes with this very act which makes it a complex social problem.

Its offshoot namely child beggary is murkier. Laws evolved over the years are mainly punitive, that mainly stress on punishment.]

This study is an attempt to understand why and how one takes to begging and would he or she like to opt out if given the opportunity.]

We would like to state that this is a qualitative study. Our efforts are to show the human side of these beggars and not make them mere statistics.

We take this opportunity to thank Mr. Rehman & Mr. R. K. Ghosh of the National Institute of Social Defence (NISD), Ms. Sehgal and Ms. Meenakshi Sood of the National Institute of Public Corporation & Child Development (NIPCCD) for their co-operation in sharing reports and research papers on beggary problem in Delhi. We also thank all those people who spent hours talking to us, giving us an insight into their lives. Thus making the study possible.

We also need to mention about the onlookers and passerbys at the various crossings whose constant unsolicited advice, remarks, comments, stares and looks made the study more interesting.

Finally, we are immensely thankful to our Director Ms. Rita Panicker for giving us this learning and enriching opportunity and for helping us to analyse the data and in editing this report.

*Priya Varadan*

*Vananda Chaudhary*

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Objectives of the Study :

1. To briefly study the history of beggars in Delhi.
2. To understand the opportunities and challenges faced by them.
3. To understand the factors forcing people into beggary.
4. To know the awareness level of beggars on laws on beggary.

The study is qualitative using the method of case studies to gather data on the various objectives of the study. Since the method of case studies was to be used, we did not go for statistically proven sample size. Sampling was random :

By means of random sampling we had preliminary interviews with 75 beggars and then focussed on 8 beggars and their families for the study. The selection of these 8 persons was based on their willingness to talk to us in detail. Interview techniques were used, however focussed and informal discussions were also held.

The questionnaire was formulated keeping in view the foresaid objectives. The questions were all open ended, meant to make sure that the response is unrestricted. It covered aspects like demographic details, life and times before and after coming to Delhi, legality, health, disability etc. (see annexure). We spent hours to days in getting to know them.

We do not claim it is an indepth study into each beggars life (to do that one would need to spend longer duration), but our endeavor has been in that direction. The study spanned one month.

## THE ISSUE :

In most urban areas, beggars are a common sight at Railway stations, temples, crossings, etc. Outstretching their arm for alms. Some see them as societal nuisance, some as a reflection of anti-people socio-economic development. But who are these beggars? What are their needs, aspiration and fears? This research is an endeavor to map the history of the beggars, to understand their opportunities and challenges for the future and to know their level of awareness on the laws pertaining to beggary.)

To start with, secondary data was the only source of information. But mere statistics on beggars and beggar homes was not what we were looking for. It did give us an idea about the prevailing scenario. The questionnaire is being used only as a guide to field research and not merely to be put in front of the target group to be duly filled. We were not looking for structured information but a one to one dialogue to get into the history of the beggar, even if it meant spending considerable hours with him or her.

We did not go for statistically relevant sample size for the same reason. Locations covered were AIIMS crossing, Lodi Road, Sai Baba Temple and Janpath (Connaught Place). Before starting the process we felt that the initial rapport building would be tough and the rest would follow through. But we found that rapport building was easier and to get into the depth of the person was a difficult task. In some cases we had to get them eateries and give money to make them actually talk to us for e.g. Savita who spoke to us only after we got her pakodas. We put our mother tongue, little knowledge of regional languages to best use to elicit answers from a few. And when the pakodas got over she left us. Initiating children to talk was difficult. We resorted to playing, making toys and sketches. In short, spending hours with them for making the initial conversation. Some approached us thinking we would provide them food, clothing etc. And when the knowledge dawned upon them that we did not mean to give anything they walked off.

There was a time when we could not find a single person at the specified crossing. We took this opportunity to visit a beggar colony situated behind Super Bazaar in Connaught Place (as informed by an auto driver). But at the end of it we got to

know that these families had for generations been making balloons and are not into begging. It seems many social organisations visit this colony.

On the first day, when we reached Janpath crossing at Connaught Place, we introduced ourselves as writers who are interested in knowing about them since we see them everyday when we pass through this area. It wasn't convincing enough. The immediate reaction to this was "*aise bahut atte hain*"; we have seen many of these kinds. There was also this incidence where the kids and the families were ready to talk, but a nearby vendor by the name Lakshmi (ex-beggar turned vendor, her story follows later) scared them saying that it would reap no benefit to them and in all possibility we would give this information to the police. What prompted this reaction was perhaps we were carrying a pad and taking down information. This made us realise, not to show as if we are recording information, and have rather come for an informal chat.

We changed our track of reasoning and told them that we are street educators who teach street children and have come to know of their needs and interest. This made them feel comfortable and convinced.

Keen observation gave us interesting insights into their behaviour, style of begging etc. In places like the Lodi Road Crossing, we sat right at the middle of the crossing to observe their modus operandi. Fear of being run over by blue line buses from both sides lingered on. But we stayed on right under the sun consuming vehicular fume.

During the conversation, we got the answers to our queries to a large extent but aspects like future and awareness on laws relating to beggary seemed frivolous, as they dismissed it off as irrelevant.

Today is all that is and tomorrow is another day. It is a matter of survival. But of course (girls see marriage as an option to exit from beggary. They came into begging due to poverty.) At first they were very shy and conscious, and felt cheapened by the act of asking for alms. But over the years they have hardened and built an armour around themselves as a shield from insults and rejection. Many seem habituated and do not look for newer opportunities even if it means a better life.



We asked them if they would give up begging if given an opportunity in terms of job. Their answer was a firm 'no', especially the adults, though children showed some inclination towards giving up this kind of life. They later told us that they **would consider working** if the whole family as a unit are employed in one place. This is very revealing as it suggests they are not adverse to quitting begging. Since they are either traditional artisans from a particular community and area or they are tribals it is important for them to work collectively. In Delhi too they work together as a group and map out their territories which they jealously guard for e.g. if one group begs at Janpath then they would always be at Janpath.

(The most sensitive subject, namely, 'police' evoked emotions like hate, anger and fear. Most of them have escaped being caught. Those who were unfortunate to be caught spoke of harrowing experiences.) A girl told us about how her cousin was caught, beaten and abused in lock-up by the police for nearly two days.

We witnessed police harassment with beggars during our next visit to Janpath. As we sat observing them across the road we saw one of the female beggar being chased by the police and being dragged to the police station. At one point when the policeman felt that he couldn't get hold of her, he used his stick to hit her on her shoulder. This is in absolute violation of police rules and law. No woman or girl is supposed to be arrested or man-handled by a male police official. We tried to chase the policeman but lost him in the maze of traffic. Speaking of police harassment the girls say "they beat us, chase us, put us behind bars, yet, we remain at the same crossing. Our resilience has tired the police considerably".

Not a single person interviewed was aware of the anti beggary law. To them, they are not criminals, to quote "*hum chori thodi na karte hain. Do we steal or rob to be harassed by the police*". In short (they do not see beggary as a crime. A few talked about the Seva Kutir van picking them up. The beggars claim that people of the Seva Kutir severely beat them and later abandon them.) The law punishes the beggar and not the unscrupulous persons who force and exploit others to beg. At times we felt as though we were encouraging them when we appreciated them whenever they got alms, but then that was the way to make them talk to us.

AIMS is a good example of disguised begging. Adults are supposedly selling incense sticks (agarbathis). But their oft repeated line is 'I have been starving for

days, I beg you to buy them'. Infact, only children are the actual beggars here. Whenever somebody passes through, children come forward for alms.

Lastly, to make sure we got authentic information we cross-checked their stories from one another. At the end of this exercise it needs to be said that documenting their lives was a learning experience for us. Importantly an eye opener as we realised they too are people like us. It would not be untrue to say that this experience humbled us to a great extent.

There are only about 8 cases documented. This definitely does not represent the whole beggar community in Delhi. But an effort has been made to look into their lives. We hope that this document would help those who are working towards rehabilitating beggars in Delhi.

## KEY FINDINGS

1. Majority migrated from villages, towns to cities (rural – urban and semi-urban to metros). The respondents came from West Bengal, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh in search of better livelihood.
- ✓ 2. Economic deprivation, uncultivable land, abject poverty are the main causes of such migration.
3. Lack of interest among natives in traditional art and crafts resulted in the artisans losing their only livelihood, for eg. the beggar community at Janpath crossing are traditional acrobatic dancers for generations and now that locals, in particular, the rich land owning class have lost interest in this art, they have also lost their patronage.
4. They prefer begging in a city away from their native place as it shields their prestige, pride and dignity. This shows that the community has a sense of dignity and are ashamed of their livelihood. But circumstances have forced them to beg.
5. Prevailing caste system, untouchability.
6. Some of them are with family and some beg alone, their kins are domestic ✓ servants, rickshaw pullers etc.
7. Most of the beggars we met at one crossing, dwell at one place and are from the same native place.
- ✓ 8. Adults earn about Rs. 60 and children earn Rs. 30 to 40. *although informally we got to earn they earn about 100-150 per day.*
- ✓ 9. There are child beggars who attend a non-formal education class run by Satya Sai International center near the Sai Baba Temple, Lodhi Road. The idea is to make themselves literate and that would better their matrimonial prospects, especially girls. However, it must be mentioned that the officials of the centre denied there were any beggar children in their class and were horrified at the thought of beggar children attending their education centre.

✓10. Girls see marriage as an option to end beggary. But our findings clearly show that marriage has definitely not been the exit from beggary (for eg. Shakila who came into begging after marriage).

✓11. There are beggars who beg because it is an easy way out.

✓12. There certainly appears to be a kind of racket to force children into begging. There are families, who pick up destitute, disabled children under the guise of giving a foster home, but actually force them into begging to fulfill their own family needs.

13. Disguise begging-for eg: Rajvanti and family at AIIMS crossing, they are seen as street vendors but are actually begging-their oft repeated lines are "buy this please, since we have not eaten for days :

14. Majority showed inclination to work if employed together as a family in one place.

15. They are possessive and very particular about their jurisdiction over prime begging zones.

## CASE STUDY AREA : JANPATH CROSSING

All 20 of them at the Janpath crossing, Connaught Place, are from Jodhpur in Rajasthan. They all belong to the *Nat Banjara* community. They dwell at Navpul near Yamuna Pushta in East Delhi. They are between the age group of 5 to 25. There are about 6 young boys and 2 young girls between the age group of 3 - 10. The rest are older girls and women. Most of them are related to each other. Apart from begging they sell small articles like pens, toys etc. Few of their family members are employed elsewhere as rickshaw pullers, construction labourers. They commute by bus and come to the crossing at 9.30 a.m. sharp and leave at 5.30 p.m. in the evening.

The *Nat Banjaras* are known for their acrobatic dancing. This has been their sole source of earning for generations. Rich landlords, *Marwaris* and foreign tourists were their audience. Today, factors like lack of interest among the native people for this art, acute drought, evils of untouchability etc., have forced them to migrate. They have been into begging since 8 years. Their only link to their village are their relatives whom they visit once a year.

A distinct feature was noticed at the crossing. About 7 members of the 20 member troupe had joint fingers. When enquired if others in their village or community (*Nat Banjaras*) had the same feature, they did not answer. In all probability this could be a genetic disorder arising out of intra-community marriages.

## CASE STUDY - 1

Arti, about 16 years old, a *Nat Banjara*

In another place, another situation one would have perhaps thought of Arti of being anything else but a beggar. Her pink Salwar Kameez and Dupatta seem to make her stand out in that crowd. As and when the red light is on, she and her one year old nephew who is safely tucked in on her side sneak through the vehicles targeting the cars especially the limousines.

"The police came and got us but we some how escaped" says Arti. Narrating their week old experience she continues" Sunita (her Cousin) was caught and mercilessly beaten by police men and left off after two days". The other girl adds "*ise unho ne rakhi liya tha*" giving subtle indication that she was sexually abused. We tried to probe further into the matter but to no avail. The constant police harassment and threat troubles her and others. She questions their action saying, "*hum chori thodi na karte hain*".

Looking back, she says her family moved into Delhi after her father died and the little land they had became barren due to severe drought. Initially, she did try to get employed as a domestic servant or labourer, but did not succeed and since these people were coming here she also joined them. It is no longer a question of likes or dislikes, but a question of sheer survival. She has to fend for her mother who is visually handicapped.

Although, her brother (Rickshaw puller) and sister-in-law stay next door, but they run a separate household. The sister-in-law, Rekha, is one of the twenty people who beg at the crossing. The sister-in-law says she begs so as to make ends meet. Arti has two more brothers, who are settled with their families in Rajasthan.

Arti feels her marriage which is slated for next year in Rajasthan with Ranjit, will be a way out of beggary to a better life. She vows never to return back to begging in Delhi. He, obviously, does not know the true state. Speaking of Ranjit, brings a faint smile in her face. She says "I have met him several times when I happen to be there" and adds "he is well off, not like us" (the boy works in a shop).

Infact most of the older girls at the crossing, were engaged to be married when they were very young. They want to solemnise their marriages and never return back. As they feel that their husbands would earn and look after them.

## **CASE STUDY 2**

**Bimla, age about 50, *Nat Banjara* from Jodhpur, Rajasthan**

Bimla and her family are a classic example of how unpredictable weather, loss of interest among natives in traditional art and untouchability can push one to acute poverty. But in all this they continued to stay on, since their Nat art or acrobatic dancing was their only source of earning. But for a long time now people of their state, especially the rich land owning community started losing interest in their art. To top it all, severe drought that occurred a decade ago forced people like Bimla and family to migrate to places like Delhi.

Today, Bimla and her two sons Azad 9 and Aaju 6, beg and sell small articles like pens, flower etc., to earn a living. Her husband is a rickshaw puller at ITO, a drunkard and so does not give a penny at home. In comparison, she likes Delhi to Jodhpur. "Here people give alms and more importantly do not insult you unlike in our place". Her daughter and sons who are married and settled in their native place are the only links to their roots. On being asked about Aaju and Azad's future, Bimla looks dazed with no response. For now, she and children are earning and that's what matters.

## **CASE STUDY 3**

**Lakshmi 40, Salem, Tamil Nadu**

Lakshmi left us speechless and trapped in her hour long rhetoric against the economically well off, media and social organisations. Filled with the choicest swears, filthy words and poetry, making us go red several times as it was accompanied with physical demonstration (on herself and attempted on us too) of how men sexually abuse socio-economically poor women. Understandably her anger and frustration is against the society, that treats her shabbily and with no dignity.

According to Lakshmi, her life started taking a down slide when she was 15. Her parents had died in a road accident and her relatives refused to look after her and 5

siblings. Her younger brother lost his mental stability in all this. The children having no where to go nor anyone to turn to, boarded the next train leaving Salem without a clue as to where to go. Without ticket they were thrown out of the train, (Lakshmi does not remember the name of the station) but they somehow reached Delhi.

Life in Delhi was a sheer fight for survival. Everything was strange to them, language, people and place. To take up a job they did not know the local language neither did they have any skills nor education. They begged, robbed, took up petty jobs whenever they got one. When life stabilised, the two brothers married and moved off. The mentally handicapped brother was lost. Nobody knows of his whereabouts. Two of the other sisters are married and well settled.

Lakshmi does not speak much of her personal life. She glosses over them, leaving gaps in her story. Lakshmi did not speak of a husband or father of her children. We suspect she might have been sexually abused and perhaps as a survival strategy taken to prostitution. Her venom against men tell us a tale of constant abuse.

Lakshmi's saga does not end there, 3 out of her 8 children died, two of them due to starvation and one during birth. And recently her newly married daughter (18) was set ablaze by the husband and in-laws. Though she has survived, she needs to go through a major operation. The Doctors have advised the removal of her breast. But, Lakshmi refuses to pay heed to their advise, saying "a woman without breasts is no woman, what will she do with her life then". For the last five years, she runs a mobile cold drink stall at Janpath (not her own) and earns Rs. 80 a day.

Her frequent reference in detail about men having exploited her sexually (including her man), her stern refusal to let her daughter go through breast removal operation, her body language gesture, makes us believe that she has been into prostitution for years and even wants her daughter too to go into it in future. Lakshmi, wanted us to pay her for sharing parts of her life story with us, she said "mujhe 300 rupiya de do aur kapda de do" (give Rs. 300 and clothes). If we had money perhaps we would have given her-who knows and why not? After all how many of us would like to share a past that was as traumatic as Lakshmi's with a stranger?



## SAI BABA MANDIR AT LODHI ROAD

At Sai Baba temple, Thursday mornings are the best. Devotees throng the temple in large numbers and this enables the beggars to earn up to Rs. 100/-. Children earn around Rs. 60/-. On a normal day they earn only half of it. Most of them get free lunch in the form of *prasad*, which consists of bananas, chola (black gram), etc. Many come here daily at 5 a.m. in the morning to have morning tea which is served by a lady devotee, (children's version ).

Unlike Janpath crossing, beggars here are into begging by themselves i.e. independently. They are mostly from West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The exact figure of beggars is not known. Approximately, there must be about 50-60 beggars on a day and almost double or more on Thursdays. There are more women and children than men. There are few clad in saffron robe or with a skullcap and seem like soothsayers. The age wise composition of the beggars here are between 2-60 years. As like elsewhere, here too the fear of being picked up by the police, persists. In their words, the Seva Kutir van picks them up, beats them. They return only to come back to begging.

Some children like Bobby, attend nearby school run by Satya Sai International for two hours daily. When we approached the school, and enquired if there were any child beggars they said that they were unaware of any beggar children attending the school. Infact they categorically denied giving admission to any such child. They say that "here children are from lower income groups and are not into begging. We do not take such children".

We were appalled by their attitude towards beggars and beggar children and the distinction they make between poor and who can avail of education.

#### CASE STUDY 4

**Hasina and Shakila, age 50 and 30 respectively Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh**

Ten years ago, Hasina would have not dreamt of being a beggar. Today, she is one. Hasina left Kanpur (U.P.) about eight years ago to Delhi. Since her husband, a mill worker, died suddenly. Her three sons refused to look after her and so she came to live with her daughter, Shakila and family. A conservative Pathan, always clad in burqua and veil, she says "I didn't know what to do in the beginning, but I had to do something to help myself and my young daughters, Pinky & Salma". But in definite terms, she states "*Jhadoo, Pocha aur Barthan main nahi karna चाह्थे थी*" her daughter adds sweeping and mopping are mundane tasks and are not paying enough. It took her nearly a year, to come out of her veil and accompany her daughter, Shakila, to this place to beg, who was already into this.

Hasina claims she did not know that her daughter was into begging. Today, Hasina, Shakila, Pinky, with Salauddin, Naseem (both about six) and two-year old Parveen Bano (grand children) come to this temple almost every day, to earn their livelihood through begging. But her fourteen-year daughter, is not part of the group. Reasons Hasina "She has to be married off and so I do not want her to beg". She proudly states her daughter, Salma, can read and write in Urdu and now Pinky is also going to a nearby NFE school to make herself literate. She strongly feels girls need to be educated (though till class 5 only) to better their matrimonial prospects.

Eight year old Pinky also confirms to her mother's beliefs. She says after class 5, she would not continue her education and would like to leave beggary after her marriage. What about Shakila?, Who is married with three children and whose husband is a daily labourer. She came to Delhi as her husband left her and her step father had made her life miserable. She married again in Delhi and discovered that her husband was an alcoholic and of promiscuous character. She tried to keep her marriage going and rehabilitate her husband, but instead, her husband left her and took with him all her money. She says "I will leave begging once my kids grow up". She came to begging after marriage. Is marriage really the route to better life?

For Hasina all this would continue till all her daughters are married and would go back to Kanpur to her old home. Back home, her relatives do not know of her real

status in Delhi. Even now she goes to Kanpur every 2 months only to come back to Delhi, when her money gets over. She would ofcourse, shield her life in Delhi, it with vigor as she says that if any of her relatives come to know about her, it would result in a loss of prestige and status for her and her family.

In conclusion, she says that if her husband's mill had paid her a pension, she would not be into this. Strangely enough she does not speak of any trade union, perhaps there was none. Like Hasina, there are hundreds of women who are pauperised overnight by a corrupt system that does not pay the compensation nor the dues to poor, illiterate widows, as they are powerless and vulnerable.

### **CASE STUDY 5**

**Bobby, aged 7, Uttar Pradesh**

She comes to the temple, every morning at 5 a.m., from nearby defence colony slums for tea, along with her friends, Govinda, aged six, and Geetha, aged seven. A woman devotee offers tea to all and sundry. She and her friends start begging, since morning, every day. Bobby in-between goes for NFE classes for two hours daily. And then, comes back to join her friends in begging. Her parents, mother, Kamla, a domestic servant, father, Bir Singh, a construction worker, one year old brother and Bobby are here in Delhi for a long time. She does not know exactly, when her parents came to Delhi. Except that, they came from U.P. For Bobby, begging and her time at the temple seems to be a leisure time. From what she describes, she likes being here and would like to continue being here. She knows exactly, what time lunch and other meals are served in the temple.

While our conversation was on, a foreigner, passed by (European) and she said "*yeh log nahin de hain*" meaning, foreigners are not forthcoming in giving alms. She informs, normally it is the women devotees who give more. There are some who chide them saying that "why don't you study or do some work instead of begging?" says Bobby. But she casually says "We don't take them seriously". Throwing more light on the begging trends, she says "disabled children, adults, elderly beggars get more alms than we do".

We asked as to why she begs, when parents are earning, she says "I do it to supplement their income and more over its fun". Others at the temple told us, there

are children who beg here while their parents earn. This is an added income to them.

It is almost a routine now, according to her, coming here in the morning for the tea, going for classes, back to the temple for lunch and for alms, and finally in the evening back to home, to help her mother make dinner and watch movies on television.

## LODHI ROAD CROSSING

Lukman (6), Mehjabeen (9), Akbar (8) Abdul Rehman (15) all come at this crossing sharp at 9 a.m. and leave at 6 p.m., except for Abdul Rehman who stays at Nizamuddin, the rest stay near Nehru Stadium. Lukman sits at India International Center crossing, the least lucrative crossing among all, according to Lukman. Mehjabeen sits at the crossing that leads to Safdurjang Tomb. Akbar and Rehman sit a few meters away at the road leading to Bhogal and Nizamuddin. No one sits at the fourth crossing, namely, Max Mueller Marg, as it is the most accident-prone road. According to the children one of the beggar was run over by a speeding vehicle and since then no one sits at this crossing. Moreover, it offers no shade from the sun unlike the other three crossings (see figure 1). It is perhaps the most lucrative crossing for beggars, each earn Rs. 100 to 150 a day.

It as if these four children have exclusive rights (not literally) to beg in this area, though a boy named Samin (16) seems to come here occasionally. Our best efforts to speak to him went futile. Another boy by the name Annan Mian, also begs at the crossing, but comes occasionally. When we cross checked about his life with other children, it turned out to be a lie.

Annan Mian came to Delhi from Dhaka, he stays with Abdul Rehman in Nizamuddin. He told us that he runs a tea shop and beggary is a means to finance his shop. And that he would give up beggary once his shop is on track. His family is in Bangladesh and he would get married once he is settled. Later when we cross checked with Abdul Rehman we found that he neither came from Bangladesh nor does he run a tea shop. He is from Delhi and is all alone.

There is competition among these children. As soon as one gets a rupee or two it is communicated to others through gestures. When they meet at lunch, they enquire about how much the other has earned. Sadly, all this is not for them but for the family they have been adopted into. Mehjabeen and Akbar in particular, are the only bread winners for the family, they live in (rest in the case study). They also keep a check on each other and their earnings and inform their respective families.

It seems like a racket here, Lukman, Akbar and Mehjabeen are orphans picked up people who got them to begging.

## **CASE STUDY 6**

### **Mehjabeen 9, Akbar 8, Bihar**

They both together earn Rs. 300 a day, but not for themselves. It is for the family they have taken shelter in. The family consists of Hamida (40) (Bangladeshi immigrant), Goonga (35) brother-in-law of Hamida as the name suggests he is deaf and dumb, Rekha (15) daughter of Hamida and her two younger siblings aged 3 and 4, the youngest brother of Mehjabeen, Salim (4), and the regular visitor Hamida's husband. Both Hamida and her husband are separated and like his brother he too is disabled (both hands and legs are affected). He runs a shop in Bihar.

Mehjabeen and Akbar support about seven members in the family and in return according to Hamida they get "good food, clothing, shelter and plenty of leisure time". Is it really so? We have been to her about several times and only in the third visit did Mehjabeen open up a little saying, "I can't talk". She continued "Goonga aur Hamida mareng" – they will beat me up. Both Akbar and Mehjabeen are a scared lot. Infact, Akbar did not utter a single word except the occasional yes or no to our queries. And not to forget his cute little grins which when flashed is visible from many meters away.

On the first day, we were with her for nearly an hour and a half at the crossing. Mehjabeen was most reluctant to talk. We tried to make her interact with us by employing different tactics such as sketching, making paper toys, etc., but still very little came from her.

Concerned about Mehjabeen's amputated leg, we asked her about it, she said "aisa hi hai". She was about to say something but checked herself as she saw Goonga approaching.

Akbar too suffers the same problem. We later came to know from Hamida that "their legs are tied as disabled ones earn more".

Gunga comes after every few hours to collect money from Akbar and Mehjabeen. As a rule they should earn atleast Rs. 100 a day. If they don't then the consequence can be well imagined.

Luckily for us on the first day itself we met Hamida, she gave us her side of the story about Mehjabeen and Akbar and of course, about herself and her family.

Hamida is from Chittagong in Bangladesh. She came to Delhi about 20 years ago. She worked as a rag picker in the beginning to earn. While she was staying at Nizamuddin, three years ago, Mehjabeen and her family happened to be her neighbour.

According to Hamida, Mehjabeen's father was a smack addict who used to beat his wife and children. It was Mehjabeen's mother, who was a rag picker and supported the family with her earnings. One day she was set ablaze by her husband in anger.

Mehjabeen's father's death is a case of custodial death. He had beaten up a policeman for money to buy drugs, he in turn was beaten by the policemen and died (Hamida's version). She says "her mother asked me to look after them and that is what I am doing!"

Justifying the children's initiation into beggary she says "I am too weak, if they have to be provided with food, clothing, they have to earn".

She sees nothing wrong in exploiting these children. Infact for her there is nothing unreasonable about her treatment. These children are tortured (by tying one leg up for 9 hours) and made to slave so that Hamida's family can not only survive but also enjoy material comforts. As Mehjabeen grows up there is every chance that she could be forced into prostitution.

Hamida, without any qualms or pangs of guilt proudly stated her daughter Rekha is educated and is trained in domesticity and her two children would also go to school. Hamida has chalked out the lives of her children, at the cost of Mehjabeen and Akbar and also Salim who would also be initiated into the same profession after a year or two. Asked about these children she says "it all depends on their destiny".

Mehjabeen seems to be sure of what the future holds for her and her siblings when she says "yeh log padne nahin denge" – these people won't let us study.

When asked whether she and her brother would give up begging if given an opportunity, she nods her head in affirmation!

## **CASE STUDY 7**

### **Abdul Rehman 16, Dhaka, Bangladesh**

His target is Rs. 60 a day. The moment that much is earned he goes back home unlike Lukman, Mehjabeen and Akbar, who stay there till late in the evening. The other reason for going back home early is to escape being caught by the Seva Kutir van, which comes regularly during the day.

His first lines were "Lukman earns more than most of us" he continues "Lukman's method of asking alms is so amusing that it catches everyone's attention including ours".

Though he readily opened up at first but later became shy. He asked us not to speak to him, in his words 'I avoid speaking to women' he adds "infact I speak to no one". A little probing lead us to the real reason of his shyness. He is very conscious of his amputated arm. He lost his arm due to a Doctor's negligence. According to him he fractured his arm after falling from a tree, 3 years back.

Abdul Rehman's family consists of his father, Mohd. Ghaus, mother, Fatima, younger brother, Hanif, elder sister Tahira and uncle Mohd. Jahangir Khan. They came to Delhi about 2 years ago from a village near Dhaka in Bangladesh, which got inundated with floods. Since then they have been staying in the slums near Nizammuddin. His father was an rickshaw puller who gave up his job due to 'disability' which in Abdul's words is "he experience acute pain in his legs". His family earns about Rs. 4000 a month.

Reminiscing about his days in Bangladesh, he says, "life was so much better there". Apparently, he use to go to school. They were economically better off



there. He and his family plans to go back when they are able to save some money. Commenting on India he says, "here we have to pay for everything".

At this crossing the Seva Kutir van picks up adults only and not children. Abdul Rehman and Annan are nowhere in sight after 12.30 p.m. when the van comes. But the children stay on till late in the evening.

Speaking about his Rs. 60 a day target he says "these children are the sole earning members of the family, their family is totally dependent on their earnings unlike mine".

## **CASE STUDY 8**

### **Lukman 6, native place not known**

Lukman is an orphan his legs are affected by birth so he moves with his hands. He was picked up by Parveen Bano and her husband to be led into begging. From what the others at the crossing told us we understand that Parveen and family have made Lukman's disability work in their favor. Accordingly, the government has allotted a low income house near Nehru Stadium and also on the grounds of his disability a tricycle has been given to him, which the family uses and not Lukman, he of course is still into begging.

At first, we thought that he is too small and inexperienced but he turned out to be a quite smart and is able to charm a few coins out of the most reluctant passer by. There is a bubbly child in him that never dies, that comes out when somebody approaches him with warmth or he withdraws into his shell whenever scolded or insulted.

His twinkling eyes, mischievous smile, unique way of asking alms are not only amusing to passerby's and us but also to other beggars at the crossing. As Abdul Rehman puts it 'he is an entertainer and that is why he gets more than most of us'.

Whenever a vehicle stops he points out three or two (with his tiny fingers) coupled with a mischievous look on his face. This means that he needs two or three rupees from them.

He doesn't say much, he only likes to play and that is what we did and thoroughly enjoyed playing with him. Whatever information we got about him was through others at the crossing.

We realised soon enough as to why he does not enter into a conversation with us, he is mortally scared of Parveen (the woman who looks after Lukman). While we were talking to Lukman, Parveen approached him with a cold stern look on her face. She whispered something to Lukman and left. After which Lukman's friendly and warm behavior was gone and he became silent and indifferent. But luckily we had got his story from Hamida and Abdul Rehman.

On face value, Lukman, Mehjabeen and Akbar may not be part of a criminal gang, but in reality they are being exploited and oppressed by couples who pose themselves as good samaritans giving succor and a family to abandoned, orphaned children. These couples are criminals who are on the watch out for destitute, abandoned children (if disabled it is a bonus) whom they can take under their guardianship so as to exploit them for their advantage.

## Conclusion

Lack of rural development and alternate source of employment has led to increase pauperisation of the rural poor; forcing people to migrate to urban areas in search of livelihood. The beggars we interviewed were cases of individuals and families thrown out of their traditional work or of women being widowed with no means of livelihood. When the migrants are unable to find employment, they take to begging.

In our study we found that despondency, disillusionment of a better life over the years has led to a kind of acceptance of fate. Those who have spent years in begging do not see any thing wrong in this act. Many want a new life, but the urge for it does not come out clear and loud because of the pessimism that has set in. Infact, as an immediate solution to their problem, they want police harassment to stop. Beggary is no crime for them and hence anti beggary laws seem unfair and unjust law.

Contrary to common belief, the persons interviewed showed an inclination to start life afresh by way of employment. But on the condition that the whole family is employed at one place. Kinship feeling is very strong among them. Sense of dignity is too strong among the community, proving that it is circumstances that has forced many to come into begging. This clearly is an hope for those working for their rehabilitation.

Among the beggars interviewed all of them felt at some level to be ashamed to be a beggar. They mentioned that back home they would have never ventured to beg as it would have meant loss of prestige and status. Whereas in a metropolitan city one could hide one's identity and become invisible in the multitude of people. They were careful to shield their present life from their relatives and communities left behind in villages, towns or smaller cities. The young girls of Nat Banjara tribe were looking forward to their marriages as an exit from beggary. Interestingly for Hasina (the widow of a mill worker from Kanpur) begging had more dignity than working as a domestic help. Perhaps she saw herself as an unfortunate poor woman with no education or skill that could get her a "decent" job and therefore by stretching her hand for alms the devout, religious individuals

can help an unfortunate person and by doing so they are performing their religious duty to the poor.

Coming to the important aspect of child beggary, the children are the most vulnerable targets caught in the clutches of exploitative natural and foster families. It is this aspect which seems more like a racket. Children and mothers are quite aware of the importance of education and are positive to the suggestion of sending children to non-formal education centres as the timings are flexible. )

An immediate outcome of this study, was to seek help for the three destitute-orphan children at the Lodhi road crossing.

In the larger interest of the beggar community, it would be worthwhile if the community were taken into consideration and a relevant lasting solution could be worked out.

It is also important to develop awareness raising strategies on the issue that would target the general public. We need to question the "act of giving alms", rather than perpetuating beggary. Perhaps, the sympathetic, religious, charitable individual could give that money to a charitable cause or perhaps we could have "alms/donation boxes" placed at strategic places where people could put the money into these boxes. This money could be used to support alternative employment opportunities for the beggar community.

As stated earlier this study is only a window into the complex issue of beggary. There has to be a detailed study of the life histories of a cross-section of the beggar community in Delhi for us to really understand the compulsions that push individuals to make a choice of being a beggar.

Butterflies, New Delhi  
October 1999

## Questionnaire

### Section One: Demographic Details

- 1.1. Name:
- 1.2 Age:
- 1.3 Sex:
- 1.4 Address:
- 1.5 Native State:
- 1.6 Religion:
- 1.7 Caste:
- 1.8 Occupation (if any):
- 1.9 Experience of Education (details):
- 1.10 Father's occupation:
- 1.11 Marital Status:
- 1.12 Details of Family Members and their occupations (a) adults, (b) children:
- 1.13 Individual Income (per month):
- 1.14 Total Family Income (per month):
- 1.15 Saving per month:
- 1.16 Debt (if any):

## **Section Two: Life in Delhi**

- 2.1 Since when are you in Delhi?
- 2.2 Why did you come to Delhi (in detail)?
- 2.3 What was your occupation prior to begging?
- 2.4 What was this life like?
- 2.5 How did you come into begging? What factors?

## **Section Three: Daily Practices**

- 3.1 How much time do you spend begging?
- 3.2. Which times of the day are best for begging?
- 3.3. How do you spend the rest of your day?
- 3.4 What are your likes and dislikes?

## **Section Four: Health Profile**

- 4.1 Do you suffer from any regular health problems / disability?
- 4.2 Whom do you approach during illnesses?

## **Section Five: Challenges and Opportunities**

- 5.1 Given an opportunity would you give up begging?
  - a) if YES, Why? Give reasons
  - b) if NO, Why? Give reasons
- 5.2 What are your pressing needs and problems?
- 5.3 What are your aspirations and fears for the future (detail)?

**Section Six: Laws and Legalities**

6.1 Have you been to any receiving homes/ Detention Homes. If YES what was your experiences?

6.2 Are you aware of the laws that make Beggary a punishable offence?

6.3 What are your experiences of the police?

6.4 What are your experiences of the general public?

6.5 How do you feel about other people's attitude and behaviour towards you?

**Miscellaneous: Any other comments**