

Experiencing Homelessness: the Case of a Women's Shelter Near Jama Masjid, Delhi

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In January 2010, the Supreme Court of India ordered the government of Delhi to provide night shelters to the homeless people in Delhi. The order also directed the government to provide blankets, basic amenities such as water and sanitation and food entitlements to the homeless people. The government responded by appointing a "Mother NGO" - The St Stephens Hospital in Delhi which would be the overall coordinator of NGOs that would undertake the work related to setting up and running these shelters. The Centre for Equity Studies, a Delhi based NGO set up a shelter for "single women" in the Urdu Park opposite the Jama masjid in the old part of the city in January 2012. The shelter was made out of tin on the outside, painted blue and lined inside with cardboard.

The shelter was intended for women who were alone on the streets, some of them with their children for a range of reasons ranging from widowhood, escaping abusive marriages, rural poverty and migration for work. However, when the shelter was surveyed by a group of researchers for a research study on the theme of "destitution" in the summer of the year 2012, it was found that most of the homeless women who were using the shelter were in-fact not "single". Many of them had husbands or partners who were rickshaw-pullers in the vicinity and yet others had developed relationships with men for the sake of protection from sexual abuse on the streets.

The area flanking the Jama Masjid, is Muslim-dominated and houses many eateries which serve Muslim food and also several small street-side vendors who sell all kinds of household articles ranging from clothes, blankets and utensils to cosmetics and under-garments. The Urdu Park which adjoins the Meena Bazaar, a market place where all these vendors sell their goods, is a public space which is easily accessible to everyone who visits that area. It is a park with multiple uses. While the homeless people use it to put up their shacks and sleep at night, young boys from the vicinity use it as a sports field to play cricket. During the interviews most women expressed that it was not "easy being a single woman" in this neighbourhood since a variety of people frequented it for different reasons. It was a bustling religious and commercial centre. It was easy to get "free food" from religious charities in this area. The eateries in the vicinity distributed left-over food to the "poor" at the end of the day. Also, many people who come to offer prayers at the Masjid gave food to the less privileged as a part of their religious rituals. Hence a lot of homeless people flocked to the

area since they “did not have to worry about their meals” (Source: information obtained through interviews with homeless women in May-June, 2012 by the author).

Located in the middle of a crowded area, it was almost impossible to have any kind of privacy for the homeless women who lived around the Jama Masjid. Before the shelter was built most of the men and women were sleeping under the open sky. There was a paid bathroom and toilet facility built by an organisation that the women would use for their sanitary needs. A lot of unsafe and illegal activities went on in and around the park. For instance there was a hoodlum kind of character who was pedalling drugs into the park and many children had become addicted to these drugs most prominently to sniffing spirit. The researchers found that there was also a human trafficking racket operating in the area. In all, there was danger of abuse and trafficking lurking for homeless single women and their children in the locality. The homeless men and women in the park also shared an uneasy relationship with the police and Municipal authorities before the formal shelter came up. Their presence and existence on the streets was threatened by the police who “cracked their whip” on these people frequently (source: information from primary interviews done by the author in May 2012).

As a strategy to protect themselves, many of these women, who had left their husbands’ homes and arrived in the old part of the city to find work got into relationships with men who offered to marry and “protect” them on the streets. This was an acceptable and convenient arrangement for both the men and women as they found a partner to take care of and be cared for while in a difficult situation of living rough on the street. As researchers, it was however difficult to understand the nuances of such relationships. The women at the shelter were not very comfortable discussing them. For instance while interviewing a woman who claimed to be the only Hindu woman in the Muslim dominated shelter at Urdu Park, I found that she was hesitant to reveal that she had married an already married man after she arrived at the Urdu park. She had left an abusive marriage and an alcoholic husband with her six children. It was the NGO that had helped her to rebuild her life. She had sent her three daughters and a son to the children’s homes run by the NGO where they were receiving an education, shelter and food and a healthier environment than the streets to grow up. She was thankful for this support from the NGO that ensured safety for her children. She defended her “second marriage” by saying that it was not easy for her to survive alone at this place if not for her second husband who was an emotional support for her and her children. She also said that she never stopped her current partner from sending money to his first wife in the village who she claimed was “mentally challenged”. By doing so the woman had countered the problem of being sexually abused by multiple men on the streets. Other women who were interviewed revealed that there was peer-pressure on them to get into relationships with men from other women in the shelter. Women with partners would dominate the shelter space and nag the “single” women to get into relationships. These relationships would help women in improving their social acceptance in the shelter as women without partners would be constructed as “loose” and “available” (source: primary survey).

Women at the shelter had complex stories to share which were difficult to fully comprehend by middle-class researchers like us, more so, since the details of their lives that they

provided varied across conversations on different days. What one could however grasp was that the space called Urdu Park was criss-crossed by multiple actors, multiple processes and multiple conflicts going on simultaneously. There was a historically significant mosque whose Imam (head priest) saw the homeless people as a menace and wanted to cleanse the area of them (source, newspaper reports from August 2014), there was the state apparatus such as the police and the municipal authorities that was largely hostile towards the homeless. There were the NGOs that were trying to provide basic services to the homeless to enable them to live with dignity, there were young men playing cricket in the field who eyed and teased the women in the shelter (source: primary survey), there were drug peddlers and human traffickers in the vicinity and finally there were the homeless men and women who were at the receiving end of multiple atrocities and generosity. Although the plight of the homeless women in Jama Masjid had improved after the intervention by the state and the NGOs, the challenges of drugs, human trafficking, class-based hostility and bias still threatened their existence in that space.

There were multiple and often conflicting processes of empowerment and disempowerment operating simultaneously at the women's shelter at Jama Masjid. Complexity and conflict was embedded in that space. Doreen Massey (2003, 2005) provides a valuable theorisation of simultaneity in space that captures this complexity. She argues that space is the "sphere of the possibility of the existence of plurality, of the co-existence of difference. It is the sphere of the possibility of the existence of more-than-one. Without space there is no 'multiplicity' in that sense". Further, she says that multiple possibilities exist in the same space based on the interrelations between the different actors. Massey posits that space has time/times within it. This is not the static simultaneity of a closed system but a simultaneity of movements (Massey, 2003:109).

Drawing from Massey's work, one can hope that with progressive court orders such as the one in January 2010 followed by concerted interventions by the state and the civil society organisations, the institutional bias against the homeless communities will reduce and they will move towards more socially inclusive and accepted lives in the city in the times to come.

Reference

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About the author

Kanchan Gandhi is an independent researcher based in New Delhi. She has been working with civil society organisations on the themes of identity and socio-economic rights of the poor. She was engaged as a researcher in a year-long study on "destitution" conducted by the Centre for Equity Studies, New Delhi in the year 2012. She is also a visiting faculty member at the School of Planning and Architecture in Delhi.

Pictures:



Chawri bazaar adjoining Jama Masjid in Old Delhi



Access road to Jama Masjid from Chawri bazaar



Meena Bazaar: flanking Jama Masjid



Jama Masjid, Old Delhi



A view of the women's shelter from the mosque



Inside the shelter