

Regulating Social Space: Begging in Two South Asian Cities

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Begging is a universal phenomenon, existing across cultures and historical periods. Equally universally, it has been subject to various forms of regulation. In South Asia there is both a place for the beggar within the social system, and a sense that this acceptance is contingent on compliance with unwritten but forceful codes of social behaviour. These rules are made evident when begging activities in public places are observed: the acts of begging take place in clearly-defined locations, following established patterns of interaction between beggars, donors and regulators such as religious officials or the police. Whether by means of social exclusion or inclusion, secular and religious systems both seek to contain, and therefore regulate, the phenomenon of begging.

Research locations

India is the second most populous country in the world. It is rapidly modernizing and developing in terms of economic prosperity, to the extent that many expatriates and people of Indian origin are now choosing to live in India rather than the West. Nevertheless poverty persists, and in a country without a State welfare system, begging is extensive. In postcolonial Delhi, a megalopolis of more than ten million people, the control of public space and of the urban poor mirrors in many ways Foucault's analysis of nineteenth century Europe. Poverty has come to be associated with disease and dangerousness, and a series of interventions have been designed to regulate the risk of urban disorder (Nigam, 2001). For example, the criminalization of begging under the 1959 Bombay Prevention of Begging Act provided for the incarceration of beggars in 'certified institutions', popularly known as beggars' homes (Gopalakrishnan, 2002). More recently, a police directive has outlawed begging at traffic intersections in Delhi (Gopalakrishnan, 2002). Such forms of regulation provide the social and legal space within which begging interactions take place. This space occupied by marginal street people may, in a metaphorical sense, be understood as an eighth 'city' to complement the legendary seven cities of Delhi.

Delhi is characterised by migration; the majority of residents have settled in post-Partition times, and subsequent waves of rural migrants have served to swell the numbers of the urban poor. The name Delhi comes from a Persian word meaning threshold, and this describes the city's physical location on the North Indian plains, whereby successive waves of settlers and conquerors have entered India. The idea of Delhi as a liminal site also relates to the meeting of diverse languages, religions and cultures in this 'city that nobody loves' (Vidal et al, 2000:16)

Contemporary city planners have succeeded to an extent in confining the poor to the urban periphery of New Delhi in *jhuggi jhompris* (illegal squatter settlements), but Old Delhi continues to accommodate large numbers of the poor and the homeless (Dupont, 2000). Observations of begging were conducted in Connaught Circus, the commercial centre of New Delhi; in Hanuman *mandir*, a major Hindu temple complex near Connaught Circus; and in *Jama Masjid*, the religious centre of Muslim Old Delhi. The religious ethos of both Hinduism and Islam encourages almsgiving to the poor, and the role of religious institutions in the social and spatial organization of begging was observed. Beggars were also present in commercial zones, where they tended to occupy marginal locations such as pedestrian subways. Thus it was observed that in both secular and religious contexts, begging was a socially and spatially regulated activity.

Nepal has been described as 'a yam between two boulders', describing its precarious geopolitical and economic location between the major powers of India and China (Gyawali, 2002). It is the twelfth poorest country in the world, and is composed of a series of minority ethnic groups. The majority of the population are Hindu, with around 10% practicing Buddhism, and a smaller Muslim minority (Gyawali, 2002). The capital city, Kathmandu, is the 'gateway to the Himalayas' and receives the majority of tourists on whom this fragile economy depends. At the time of research, Maoist insurgency and frequent political and economic strikes led to widespread disruption, and were the precursors of the overthrow of the monarchy in 2008, and the establishment of a democratic republic.

Kathmandu is one of the cities in the world which are renowned for their levels of begging (Dodd and Donald, 2006). Many beggars target the tourist trade, while others are itinerants who beg at many of the major Hindu sites throughout South Asia. Some report that sites such as Kathmandu's Pashupatinath temple complex are less competitive for beggars than many Hindu sites in India (*Kathmandu Post*, August 2001). Begging has an established place within Buddhism, and many lay people are attracted to temples in search of the means of subsistence: within Buddhism spiritual merit accrues to those who donate alms to the poor. Buddhist monks and nuns also routinely receive alms while reciting mantras and praying in front of temples.

Observations of begging encounters were conducted in central Kathmandu; in the city's Pashupatinath Hindu temple complex; in Changyu Narayan Hindu temple located in the Kathmandu valley; and in Boudhnath, a series of temples, shops and residences serving the city's Tibetan Buddhist population.

Methodology

The main research technique was unobtrusive observation of a variety of public places wherein begging was known to take place. Unobtrusive observation is a well-established research technique, and is distinguishable from the contested ethical status of covert participant observation in that the researcher is a legitimate member of the public, and in that there is an implicit consent to general observation by all actors within public space (Lee, 2000). Furthermore, there is little expectation of privacy within South Asian social life, much of which is open to general public surveillance.

The core concern was to engage in observations of begging behaviour and interactions in public places, noting the spatial distribution of begging in certain key locations, the times in which begging did or did not take place, and the nature of interactions between beggars, donors, and those seeking to regulate begging activity. Extensive field notes were recorded, along with still and video recordings, and mapping of begging activity within key locations (see Pink (2007) on conducting visual ethnographies). In order to maintain the 'naturalness' of photographs, permission was not sought in advance, although payments were made to all participants, in line with the ethical position that payment should be made in return for assistance with fieldwork. (While there are valid arguments that research participants should not be

paid, in this case I believe that the social and economic imbalance between researcher and the researched justifies payment; see Mikkelsen (2005) on this point).

Cultural context of begging in India and Nepal

Begging is a more or less universal phenomenon, being found in most cultures across history (with occasional exceptions as perhaps in some Communist societies). In many developing societies begging is embedded within social and religious systems (Glasser, 1994). Consequently, there may be less social stigma associated with begging than in the West, though this is not to say that people who beg are accepted as equal citizens (Jordan, 1999). In India and Nepal beggars are often subject to social and political controls, but they do have an established place within the social system. Religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam all encourage almsgiving, while nations without formal welfare systems usually recognize the need for informal systems of support for the poor. Historically, certain Hindu castes have been associated with begging as a profession (Thurston and Rangachari, 1909; 2001), while in contemporary South Asia groups such as *sadhus* and *sadhavis* (wandering Hindu holy men and women) and *hijras* (transgender men) traditionally engage in begging as one of their means of subsistence (Hartsuiker, 1993; Jaffrey, 1996).

Social regulation of public space

Spatial boundaries are used across cultures to assert a moral order (Duncan, 1983). Regular attempts are made to redefine and make secure shifting boundaries, and above all to regulate those who inhabit the social margins of the city. Marginal groups such as street people are perceived as dangerous because of their lack of a fixed location or clearly-defined social role. Douglas reminds us that 'all margins are dangerous ... Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins' (1964:121).

Much has been written on the social and physical exclusion of such populations (see for example Sibley (1995) on the 'geographies of exclusion'). Equally important, however, are the techniques of inclusion which serve also to control and regulate marginal people. Exclusionary methods include the classification, segregation and stigmatization of deviant or marginal groups. Inclusionary methodologies, by

comparison, seek to control by means of integration of the individual into established social networks and systems (Cohen, 1985; Lyon, 2003). While these techniques have been characterized as ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ respectively, both are equally effective methods of social control. Indeed, the ‘soft’ methods are arguably more effective since they are both more extensive in range (‘widening the carceral net’), and more appealing to individuals in that they offer a degree of welfare and community support. In both Kathmandu and Delhi instances of begging were met with attempts to regulate this practice. Exclusionary responses were designed to discourage begging in general or at least to stop begging taking place in specific locations (see Figures 1-4).

Attempts to outlaw or exclude begging were made by both secular and religious authorities. In general they sought to prevent begging taking place within certain sites such as mosques or temples, or to keep certain city locations ‘free’ from begging.

Inclusionary responses aimed to meet some of the material needs of beggars (food or alms) in such a way as to contain and control them. In particular, this type of response sought to regulate begging in both spatial and temporal terms, so that it would take place only at certain times and in specified locations (see Figures 5-8). Religious institutions frequently provided food or alms to beggars and this often followed a regular pattern in terms of time and place. For example, food may be distributed in temples or near mosques at regulated times and days of the week. This serves to include beggars into the fabric of their respective religious institutions, and also serves to regulate their behaviour, for example in discouraging begging outside of specified times and places.

Conclusion

Despite – or perhaps because of – rapid development in South Asia, poverty remains widespread. Informal systems of welfare remain in place, assuming responsibility for the poor long since ceded to State welfare provision in developed societies. Begging remains widespread, and is regulated by effective systems of control, using a combination of exclusionary and inclusionary techniques. Foucaultian visions of panoptic social control combine with traditional systems of aid variously to categorize, separate or integrate the urban poor into the socio-spatial fabric of the city.

Captions to Figures

Figure 1

This is a direct exhortation to visitors to the Changu Narayan temple complex in the Kathmandu valley, Nepal. Written in English rather than Nepali, it appeals primarily to foreign tourists.

Figure 2

Contrary to the practice in many Hindu temples wherein begging is commonplace, the Shri Lakshmi Narain temple in New Delhi forbids begging in or near the temple.

Figure 3

A tour guide reprimands a tourist who has given money to child beggars within the *Jama Masjid* (Friday Mosque) in Old Delhi, India.

Figure 4

A mosque official evicts a man who was begging inside the *Jama Masjid*, shortly before midday prayers were about to take place.

Figure 5

Police officers pay no attention to people begging outside the perimeter fence of the *Jama Masjid*. Begging is generally accepted as long as it occurs in the 'right' locations, and at the appropriate time.

Figure 6

People may donate food alms to destitute people at one of several restaurants near to *Jama Masjid*; a donation of 10 rupees (£0.15 or \$0.30) per person will buy a meal of *dal-roti* (bread and lentil stew). Almsgiving is one of the five pillars of Islam.

Figure 7

Local people wait for food alms within the Tibetan Buddhist temple complex at Boudhnath in Kathmandu, Nepal. Buddhist monks supervise the distribution, while the people call out 'line, line' as they form an orderly queue.

Figure 8

Pashupatinath temple complex near Kathmandu, Nepal, is one of the holiest sites within Hinduism. Here *sadhavis* (itinerant Hindu holy women) wait for alms inside one of several local *ashrams* (religious retreats).

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