

Rural Homelessness in India

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Contact details and affiliation:

Dr. Julia Wardhaugh
Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice
School of Social Sciences
Bangor University
Bangor
Gwynedd
LL57 2DG
United Kingdom
Tel: ++44 (0) 1248 382007
Email: sos026@bangor.ac.uk
Fax: ++44 (0) 1248 382125

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Glossary

Census house

The Census of India defines a census house as any dwelling which has: a roof, a separate main entrance from the road, and which is recognised as a separate unit of residence. Thus, slum or squatter dwellings are often not included in definitions of homelessness as they fulfil these criteria. Pavement-dwellings are usually not included as census houses as their roofs and structures are not permanent.

Hidden homelessness

In this context hidden homelessness has two meanings. The first is that rural homelessness (in India as elsewhere) often remains hidden because of the lack of studies of the phenomenon, in contrast with the greater attention paid to urban homelessness. The second meaning of hidden homelessness refers to the homeless

people who live with other households in rural areas. Because their housing need is not officially registered, they remain an invisible or hidden population.

Houselessness

In India and other developing countries reference is often made to houselessness, rather than homelessness. The emphasis is thus placed on those without any form of shelter (houseless people) rather than including those living in temporary, insecure or unsatisfactory accommodation (homeless people). The latter definition is more often used within developed nations. In contrast, developing nations are more likely to concentrate on the most extreme cases of housing need.

Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) scheme

India's Ministry of Rural Development has undertaken the Indira Awas Yojana scheme as part of its Bharat Nirman undertaking to improve rural infrastructure. The IAY plan has been to provide new rural housing for houseless people, and to replace kutcha (inadequate) accommodation. The intended recipients of this housing are the most socially and economically disadvantaged groups in rural India.

Kutcha and pukka housing

Kutcha (in Hindi kaccā) means something which is either temporary or of a low standard; pukka (in Hindi pakkā) means something of a good or reliable quality. Kutcha housing is of an inadequate standard, either in terms of the quality of its construction or its condition and amenities. Pukka housing is considered to be of a satisfactory standard.

Rural-urban migration

Rural poverty and landlessness often leads to rural-urban migration, which in turn serves to increase levels of urban homelessness. Some migration is seasonal, with migrants returning to their villages to engage in agricultural work. More often the migration is permanent, with typically male members of the household becoming homeless in the cities, while their families remain in their home areas. Government responses may either be to improve rural infrastructure and thus attempt to prevent the causes of rural-urban migration, or to attempt to regulate the lives of the urban homeless population.

Synopsis

Rural homelessness in India (as in many developed and developing countries) is a relatively hidden and unknown phenomenon. The processes of counting, defining and categorising rural homelessness have barely begun. Yet the scale of rural homelessness in India is vast and likely to grow further along with India's expanding population. The causes of rural homelessness include poverty and landlessness and wars, conflicts and natural disasters. This chapter addresses the causes, definitions and extent of homelessness in rural India, and provides both a typology of rural homelessness and some cases and illustrations of the experience of homeless people in rural India.

Rural Homelessness in India

Overview

The most distinctive feature of rural homelessness – as opposed to urban – is its hidden or even invisible nature. It is true that rural homelessness tends to occur at lower rates than in urban areas, and certainly there is relatively little research on rural homelessness in India. In addition there is a prevailing myth that homelessness does not exist in the countryside because rural households will always ‘look after their own’, that no-one would be abandoned by the joint or extended family system. However, rural homelessness certainly exists in India – with a rural population of around 740 million people it would be difficult to imagine that it does not¹. Over 70% of India’s population is rural, yet it also has the second largest urban population in the world, second only to China (Census of India, 2001). Using references from the academic literature, official statistics and online news reports, this chapter builds a picture of a hidden but widespread phenomenon.

In the cities it is not possible to overlook the homeless: from the pavement-dwellers of Kolkata to the squatter settlements of Delhi and Mumbai, the evidence is there for all to see. In contrast, homeless people in rural India remain largely hidden. Many will stay with other households, and these people are not recognised by any official count of homelessness. Others stay in relief camps while significant numbers belong to itinerant groups. Perhaps the most significant feature of homelessness in India (and many other developing countries) is the extent to which the urban and rural areas are inextricably linked in both social and economic terms. Rural poverty and landlessness often triggers rural-urban migration, which in turn serves to swell the numbers of urban homeless people (See Figure 1). Cities like Delhi are populated largely by people who have migrated from neighbouring states, and desperate people leave the countryside every day to seek a living in the metropolitan areas. In short, levels of rural homelessness would be much higher if it were not the case that the problems of rural poverty and housing shortage are ‘exported’ to the cities.

Definitions and typologies of rural homelessness

In any context it is very difficult to define homelessness and more so if taking a Western perspective on a developing society. If Western typologies were used in the Indian context – using a fairly wide and liberal interpretation – then vast numbers of people would be included as those lacking secure, permanent and adequate shelter. In India reference is made more often to people being ‘houseless’ or ‘shelterless’ rather than ‘homeless’. The difference here is that the emphasis is on those lacking any form

¹ The Census of India (2001) gives a total population of 1.029 billion people, of whom 72% are rural, giving the figure of 740 million people living in rural areas.

of shelter, rather than including those who have no real 'home' in both physical and social terms (the sense more often used in the West).

Ideas of home and homelessness vary greatly according to social, economic and cultural context (Glasser, 1994; Glushkova and Feldhaus, 1998). It would seem sensible, then, to use definitions and typologies appropriate to the context of research (see Speak (2004) and Springer (2000) on the construction of typologies of homelessness in developing societies). Even so, definitions are seldom straightforward and few take specific account of the nature of rural homelessness. In this section a typology of Indian rural homelessness is put forward, drawing on a combination of official definitions of homelessness, existing typologies designed for the urban context, and an understanding of the contours of rural homelessness.

The official Indian definition of homelessness is someone who does not live in a 'census house' (Census of India, 2001). A 'census house' is a structure with a roof and consists of 'a building or part of a building having a separate main entrance from the road ... used or recognised as a separate unit' (Bannerjee Das, 2001:37). So pavement-dwellers are classed as homeless while many residents of slums or squatter settlements are not (though they would be included in most Western definitions of homelessness). While pavement-dwellers do have a roof this is defined as temporary or inadequate (kutcha), lacking in secure or pukka construction.

Bannerjee Das (2001) offers a useful typology of homelessness, adapting Western categories to the Indian context:

1. Destitutes
2. Migrants
3. Pavement dwellers
4. Inmates of institutions
5. Occupants of emergency camps
6. Street children

However, this typology is based on studies of homelessness conducted in urban areas, and would need further adaptation to be relevant to the rural context. The following typology attempts to incorporate the major groups likely to experience different types of rural homelessness.

Table 1 Typology of rural homelessness in India

Type of homelessness	Location	Causes	Experiences	Responses
Displaced persons	Relief camps	Natural disasters; communal riots; infrastructure development; political conflict	May stay in camps for months or years after becoming homeless	Government and international aid; provision of relief camps
Migrants	Various, both rural and urban	Rural poverty and landlessness leads to urban migration; seasonal migration to and from cities to villages	Usually males migrate and become homeless in urban areas, rest of family remain in rural area; women and children usually migrate only following familial abuse	Those who migrate to urban areas may (or may not) receive aid e.g. night shelters or food distribution
Inmates of institutions	Institutions, such as beggars' settlements or homes, or leprosy colonies	Physical disability or diseases; destitution	Destitute people have recourse to begging, and may become residents in beggars' settlements or State homes for beggars	Social ostracism of beggar settlements and residents of beggars' homes and leprosy colonies
Homeless while living with another household	Accommodation with another household, usually insecure and overcrowded	Destitution.	Social marginality and penury	Little if any official response; hidden homelessness
Slum and squatter residents	Slum and squatter settlements (usually small and relatively hidden)	Poverty and landlessness; migration from other areas	Social marginality and penury	Lack of official recognition; periodic clearances of settlements
Itinerant groups	No fixed location	Religious mendicants; gypsy groups;	Social and economic marginality; may or	Not officially defined as homeless and

		itinerant tribal groups	may not define themselves as homeless	therefore not eligible for official aid for the homeless; may rely on NGOs or informal aid
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Some categories reflect official definitions of homelessness and some mirror the urban categories described above. Those who are homeless while living with another household do not appear in any official statistics, nor are they usually recognised as a feature of either rural or urban homelessness. The itinerant groups are explicitly excluded from formal recognition of homelessness but are included here since – leaving aside the difficult question of choice of lifestyle – they experience the same poverty, insecurity and lack of adequate shelter as others (Tippie and Speak, 2009). In working towards a definition, we must take into account individual agency. Those who are officially defined as homeless may not see themselves in this way; conversely, those omitted from official (or academic) definitions may understand themselves to be homeless (Wardhaugh, 1999; 2000).

Groups such as sadhus and faqirs may be understood as having chosen a radical form of homelessness for religious reasons (for them ‘home’ is both everywhere and nowhere), while some tribal groups follow a nomadic lifestyle for economic and social reasons (Hartsuiker, 1993; Hausner, 2008) (See Figures Two and Three). While religious mendicants are respected in Indian society and occupy an established place, nomadic groups increasingly find it difficult to claim their economic and social space. The Van Gujjar people of Uttar Pradesh, for example, ‘have a feeling of homelessness in their own home’ (Hasan, 1986:15). In 2009 the Van Gujjars were denied permission to return from their winter grounds near Dehra Dun (Uttar Pradesh) to their summer pastures in Uttarkashi district of Uttar Pradesh, thus threatening their traditional way of life (Rastogi, 2007; Tribune, 2009).

Residents of rural squatter and slum settlements are included here, since they have little or no security of tenure, and their accommodation is likely to be inadequate. While the same is true of their urban counterparts who are often not included in definitions of homelessness, they are included since their poverty and insecurity of tenure is likely in many cases to cause them to enter the rural-urban migration cycle and to therefore join the ranks of the urban homeless population.

Thus we may begin to define the parameters of rural homelessness in India. Rather than a single definition we may envisage a continuum of types of homeless experience. The inclusion of groups not traditionally homeless is not intended to inflate the total numbers defined in this way. Rather, the aim is to capture a sense of the range of experiences which may lead people into (and sometimes out of) homelessness, and to highlight the ways in which becoming and being homeless is a dynamic process rather than a static event in a person’s life.

Counting rural homelessness

If defining homelessness is difficult, then perhaps the question of counting homelessness is even more troublesome. It has been widely argued that any official

count of homelessness is likely to be a significant under-estimate of the real numbers (Glasser, 1994; Tipple and Speak, 2009). This is particularly true for rural homelessness where homeless people are more hidden, and where few serious studies have been made (see Cloke and Milbourne (2006) on rural homelessness in North America and Western Europe). So we must operate with the caveat that any figures cited are likely to record the minimum numbers of homeless households or individuals. Census of India figures for homelessness record this by states without a breakdown of rural and urban areas within each state, but there is an estimate of overall levels of rural and urban homelessness.

Census figures (2001) indicate that in rural areas 1,165,167 people were houseless, or 0.85% of the rural population. In addition, there were 4,044,152 people in institutions (2.94%); many definitions of homelessness would include institutional populations, although they can not be said to be 'houseless'. Depending on our definitions – 'houseless' or 'houseless plus institutional' - we may say that either just less than 1% or just fewer than 4% of the rural population are homeless, according to official counts. Translating this into numbers, this gives us around 6 million houseless people and around 28 million homeless people if we include those in institutions. We must bear in mind that these are minimum numbers, indicating only those counted by the Census, and not including hidden homeless people (those living with another household), or itinerant populations.

There is also a record of housing need in rural areas. The Ministry of Rural Development (2009) estimate that there is a shortage of 28.1 million rural houses, needed to address the needs of the houseless and those living in kutchha houses. Based on an average of 4.5 persons per rural household (Census 2001 figures) this gives a total of 126.45 million people in need of adequate rural housing (from a total population of around 740 million, or around 1 in 6 of the rural population). These figures relate to a wide definition of homelessness, including those living in substandard accommodation as well as those without any form of shelter. Nevertheless, it is interesting that this matches the official definitions of housing shortage, and it gives us some idea of the scale of rural housing need.

Under the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) scheme around 11.5 million rural houses were built between the years 1985-2004, designed both to provide new housing for the houseless and to replace kutchha rural housing (Ministry of Rural Development, 2002; 2005). The main recipients have been those living below the poverty line, and belonging to the most socially disadvantaged groups. The Bharat Nirman programme was established 'to end shelterlessness' in rural areas, and in the first four years (2005/06-2008/09) 7.176 million houses were built, more than the projected 6 million (Ministry of Rural Development, 2009). The plans are to build a further 12 million houses in the five years from 2009/10, enough to accommodate 54 million people (See Figure 4).

However, as we have just seen, there is a shortfall of 28 million houses, or accommodation for 126 million people. The planned building programme – while ambitious and while having exceeded its previous targets – aims to provide accommodation for less than half those numbers (12 million houses for 54 million people). In addition, the population is projected to rise significantly by the end of the Bharat Nirman building programme in 2014. By then the total population of India is

projected to rise by 210 million, with around 150 million living in rural areas (Census of India, 2001). In short, even ambitious building programmes will not be sufficient to address the existing housing needs of the rural population, a population which is predicted to grow very significantly in the next few years.

Causes of rural homelessness

The causes of rural homelessness are both simple and complex. Put simply, poverty and landlessness are the prime causes of rural homelessness. In a more complex form, we may see that rural and urban homelessness are intimately connected. Typically, rural poverty may cause the male members of households to migrate to urban areas in search of work (Dupont, 2000). They then remit money to the family left at home, who continue to reside there often in impoverished and insecure circumstances. Seasonal migration may also occur when work is available on the land, but few of these migrants return permanently to their villages – and nor do their family members usually join them in the cities. In terms of gender, relatively few women will migrate to urban areas, given the social restrictions against women living a life away from familial controls. Those who do leave their villages are often those fleeing familial abuse (from in-laws as well as husbands), or else young women entering into the sex trade (Nussbaum, 2000). Children who leave their home villages have also often been victims of family violence, or else they may be trafficked into the begging or sex trades (Nair and Sen, 2005; Orchard, 2007).

As well as the poverty and insecurity experienced at the individual and family level, it is often the case that natural disasters or various forms of social upheaval cause large-scale rural homelessness, often on a scale unimaginable in Western terms. For example, up to 600,000 people were made homeless by the Gujarat earthquake in 2001 (Times Higher Education, 2003), while 275,000 houses were destroyed in the 1999 Orissa cyclone (Rediff On The Net, 1999). The most recent and largest-scale disaster was the flooding of the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka in 2009, when 2.5 million people were made homeless. In one area alone, around 200,000 people were displaced from 100 villages along the Krishna River in Andhra Pradesh (Reuters, 2009). Annually around 30 million people are affected by disasters, with 2.34 million houses being lost, which is around 1% of the total housing stock of 233 million houses (Census of India, 2001; Chauhan, 2009). (See Figure 5 for a map of India indicating locations mentioned in the text).

Other disasters and upheavals have been created by people rather than geological events. For example around 100,000 people have been displaced by the building of the Tehri dam in Uttaranchal, northern India, many remaining homeless for years as disputes are entered into regarding compensation for lost land (Chauhan, 2005; Thai Indian News, 2009a) (See Figure 6). These figures are replicated in other major infrastructure projects across the country (Roy, 2002). Social conflict may also cause widespread displacement and long-term homelessness (Seshadri, 2008). Insurgency campaigns in Kashmir and the Northeast states have displaced many thousands of people, while about 150,000 people were made homeless - staying in around 100 relief camps - following the communal riots in Gujarat in 2002 (Frontline, 2002).

Experiencing rural homelessness

To be homeless is to be a person without a physical place to call one's own. It is also often to be without a clear place in the social world. Family and home are important in all societies, but particularly so in Indian society. In traditional rural culture it is almost unthinkable to be alone and without a place within the family and community. A rural household is defined to a very large extent within the context of extended family networks, and often more than one household will share the same house: each family unit is defined as those who share the same hearth for the purposes of cooking and sharing meals.

There is a paradox inherent in homelessness. In most countries the right to shelter is recognised as a fundamental human right, and in India this right to shelter is recognised in Article 21 of the Constitution (Maheshwari, 2009). Those who are homeless are understood to be among the most impoverished and disenfranchised citizens. Yet in all societies homeless people are defined as outsiders, and are often identified as scapegoats for society's ills (Tipple and Speak, 2009). Common stereotypes include the perceptions that they are either lazy or hapless individuals who refuse to work, or else cunning and manipulative people who choose to engage in begging or criminal activity. In India homeless people may be described in neutral terms such as (in Hindi) *be-ghar logon* (people without houses) or more pejoratively as *kangla* which literally means someone without money or resources, but is often used to mean vagabond or homeless junkie (Bannerjee Das, 2001; AHRN, 2003).

To be or to become homeless is not only to lose access to decent and secure shelter: it is also to lose many basic human rights and entitlements. It is very common for homeless people to lack voting rights. Often their status is illegal or uncertain, they may lack birth certificates and other documentation and so they frequently do not appear on voters' lists (Tipple and Speak, 2009). Therefore – unlike slum dwellers – they do not represent a vote bank and have little or no political influence. In New Delhi, for example, one NGO (Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan) has taken the initiative to register homeless people to vote, but similar initiatives are as yet unheard of in rural areas (Thai Indian News, 2009b).

The majority of homeless people also lack ration cards entitling them to subsidised food, even though they clearly belong to the poorest sections of society (Times of India, 2006). Again, the reason is lack of official documentation. Some may have been born into homeless families while others are rural-urban migrants. Whatever the reason, they are likely to lack the documentation required in modern societies, most importantly the identity card.

No identification meant they could not get permanent government jobs or access any government schemes. They were also vulnerable to being exploited by the street mafia and the police. We also realised how important identity was to individuals as it gave them a sense of pride and acceptance in society. (Sanjay Kumar, co-ordinator of Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan; cited by Gurung, 2008).

In short, homeless people are marginalised and disenfranchised. In the cities there are many NGOs working both to provide basic services and to improve the social status

of the homeless population. In rural areas it is much less likely that homeless people will find any aid in terms of food, shelter and other essential services. Nor are they likely to encounter agencies working to empower homeless people, for example in terms of civil and human rights.

Responding to rural homelessness

In considering official responses to rural homelessness, we should do so at two levels. First, what are the responses to the needs of homeless people in rural areas? Second, what is being done to prevent the poverty and landlessness which triggers rural-urban migration and consequently increases levels of urban homelessness?

To address both questions together, it is clear that there have been concerted government efforts to improve the rural infrastructure. The flagship Bharat Nirman plan was instituted in 2005 and aimed to improve rural housing, roads and water, telephony and electricity supplies, and has been deemed a success on four out of six measures attempted (Hindustan Times, 2006). Its initial target of building six million rural houses over four years (from 2005-06 onwards) was exceeded, with over seven million dwellings being constructed during this period. These dwellings were designed to serve the needs of the houseless and those residing in kutcha houses. The Bharat Nirman plan continued after this five-year period, and at the time of writing, the current plans were to double the target number of houses to be built, aiming at the construction of 12 million dwellings during the five years from 2009-10. This plan operates in the context (in 2009) of an estimated shortfall of rural housing of some 28.1 million dwellings (Ministry of Rural Development, 2009).

So the initial five-year plan exceeded its targets for rural house building, and the numbers of planned dwellings was doubled for the next five-year plan. While this would seem to be good news for rural households – and indeed it has provided affordable housing for many – there is a problem with the large (and growing) rural housing shortfall. By official estimates in 2009, 28 million houses are needed to deal with rural houselessness and kutcha housing, and it is planned to build around 12 million dwellings in the five years from that date. This means that by 2014 there will remain a shortfall of 16 million houses, or accommodation for around 72 million people². In addition the rural population is projected to increase significantly during that period, by around 150 million people³ (Census, 2001). This will mean that a further 33 million dwellings would be required to accommodate this increased rural population. In short, despite determined governmental efforts and successful building plans, the shortfall in rural housing provision is large and expected to grow still further.

Portraits of rural homelessness

² Figures for numbers of houses required for total population are based on the ratio of 4.5 persons per rural household (Census, 2001).

³ Census data (2001) predicts a rise in the total population of India from 1.028 billion in 2001 to 1.238 billion in 2014. Of the extra 210 million people approximately 72% will be born in rural areas, a total of around 151 million people.

India is a vast and diverse country, with a population of over one billion people and a multiplicity of natural environments, religions, languages and cultures. The experience of rural homelessness is therefore mediated by location, social identity and cultural experiences. While it is impossible to capture this diversity of experience in one short chapter, a series of vignettes may help us to understand the nature of rural homelessness and kutcha housing in India.

Deeparapara is a settlement in rural Chhattisgarh which accommodates people affected by leprosy who earn their living mainly by begging. Although not houseless, they live in kutcha accommodation (tiny units of 6 x 7 feet). The residents belong to the Scheduled Castes, and are segregated from their neighbours ('caste lepers') in the nearby village of Premnagar. All of those living in Deeparapara had been 'disentitled' in their villages of origin (Harriss-White, 2005:886). The social stigma associated with leprosy in India means that many with the disease are constrained to live in separate colonies, by social pressure and convention if not by legal requirement (BBC News, 2007). In categorising this type of settlement – and other forms of beggars' settlements in rural India – we may see it as lying somewhere between the kutcha housing experienced by many of the rural poor and a type of unofficial institutional living. Clearly the residents have little choice of location and undergo a form of physical segregation, and so their settlements may be understood as being akin to incarceration in an institution. The parallel with those who have been criminalized for begging and subsequently detained in State-run beggars' homes may be advanced (Lal, 2007).

Dayavati Sakat is the head of the panchayat (village council) of Chhibora village in the Satna district of Madhya Pradesh, and a grassroots activist. She has engaged in advocacy work for women and for the underprivileged Dalit (formerly known as untouchables or outcastes) and Adivasi (tribal peoples understood to be the original inhabitants of India) groups in her village. She has worked to identify the most disempowered women in her village, including homeless, widowed and disabled women. Housing need is inextricably linked to physical survival as well as to human rights and social status: 'For poor dalit women, property ownership can sometimes spell the difference between life and death' (Mehrotra, 2009:4). Although a certain percentage of women are required by law to be represented on panchayats, effective decision-making is often dominated by male relatives of the elected female members. Thus, effective advocacy such as this housing rights work in Madhya Pradesh is an interesting example of how grassroots democracy may work.

Goa is a relatively affluent and educated state, one heavily reliant on the tourist industry. There is a significant migrant population, mostly originating from rural areas in the neighbouring states of Maharashtra and Karnataka. A large proportion of these migrants settle in slum areas of Goa, in both rural and urban areas (Mani with Noronha, 2008). (See Figure 7). They are mostly employed in the construction and tourist industries, in the latter case often in the unregulated sector as beach vendors. Others – including many of their children – work as rag-pickers and recyclers of glass and paper (De Venanzi, 2003). Some groups – such as the Lamanis – are trafficked into Goa, the women to work in the sex trade and the children as domestic labour or as beggars; sometimes Lamani children are trafficked in order to be 'sold' to rich families under the guise of adoption (Nair and Sen, 2005). The Lamanis are defined as one of India's itinerant or gypsy tribal groups (belonging to the wider category of

Banjara peoples). Known in Western India as ghat⁴, they are commonly viewed as a troublesome and marginal population. Having migrated in search of a better livelihood, they go on to experience rural or urban homelessness in Goa's slum and squatter settlements.

Conclusion

Rural homelessness in India (as in many developed and developing countries) is a relatively hidden and unknown phenomenon. The processes of counting, defining and categorising rural homelessness have barely begun. Yet the scale of rural homelessness in India is vast. Hundreds of thousands of people may become homeless following frequent natural disasters, and may remain without permanent shelter for months or even years. At least 6 million people are without any form of shelter, while a further 22 million live in institutions. At the time of writing (2009) there was a shortfall of 28 million rural houses, needed to provide accommodation for 126 million people currently houseless or living in kutcha housing.

The causes of rural homelessness include poverty and landlessness, as well as wars, conflicts and natural disasters. The scale of housing need is such that it has not been satisfactorily met despite the efforts of the national government and international aid agencies. The experiences of rural homelessness are as diverse as India's population, and a few brief examples and cases have given some sense of this wide spectrum, from villagers displaced by dam construction in the north to rural slum-dwellers in the south. While rural homeless people in India – like homeless people everywhere – commonly experience marginality and disenfranchisement, many are creative in their survival strategies and some are engaged in social activism to improve the rights of homeless people.

⁴ Ghati has the literal meaning of someone who originates from beyond the Western Ghats, and is therefore an outsider. It also has the pejorative meaning of cheap or worthless.

Further reading

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