



## The Invisible Population in Indian Cities

**Dr. Lakshmi Sivaramakrishnan  
& Pinki Mandal**

### **Abstract**

*This house less people are socially excluded population making a living under very adverse conditions. They have no identity as they do not possess any formal voters ID card or Ration cards. They are often regarded as invisible population by the elite in cities. They are often denied access to public services and food schemes. Many anti poverty programmes have been taken up by the government of India for the urban poor and have focused on shelter up gradation and provision of basic services , but little has been done for the shelter less and homeless population. They are the most vulnerable among the urban poor as they were unable to find shelter even in the slums. They have often been ignored by urban researchers and city officials. According to the UN habitat report 2003 India has about 20 million homeless people and Kolkata alone has 1 million people.*

*In this paper an attempt has been made to analyze the concept of homelessness, the factors contributing to it and policy measures taken up by the government of India. An attempt has been made to show the socio-economic conditions and problems of these homeless population on the basis of data obtained from a primary survey carried on among the shelter less and homeless population in the city of Kolkata.*

### **Introduction**

Cities in the developing world are plagued with urban poverty and one of the reflection of this is the shelter less or homeless population in urban areas particularly the metropolitan cities. In fact shelter less or homeless is a social problem associated with poverty and housing shortage in urban areas. The growth of urban infrastructure development in the Indian cities is overwhelming but amidst the thriving development there constitutes a population who still remain shelter less as far as a roof is concerned, unorganized as far as labor is concerned, marginalized as far as their rights are concerned and invisible as far as the numbers are concerned particularly to the officials. These homeless are also known as pavement dwellers in India.

The study of homeless or shelter less in urban geography evolved with humanistic geography. Humanistic geography achieves an understanding of human world by studying people's relation with nature, their geographical behavior as well as their feelings and idea in regard to space and place. (Tuan, 1976). This space and place becomes important in urban areas as both the have and have not's live in the same city space , but both co exist in a very social , economic and political condition. Homeless becomes more profound in urban areas than rural areas, because space in urban areas is also segregated. Access to public space is also

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*Dr. Sivaramakrishnan, Associate Prof., Dept. of Geography, Jadavpur Univ, E-mail: lakshmi.bu@gmail.com & Pinki Mandal, Teacher, Dept. of Geography, Barrackpore Rastraguru Surendranath College, E-mail: pinki.mandal@gmail.com*

Table. 1: Homeless Population in India (in lakhs)

Year	Total	Rural	Urban
1961	12.65	9.70	1.95
1971	19.86	15.20	4.66
1981	23.43	17.24	6.19
1991	20.07	12.82	7.25
2001	19.44	11.65	7.89

Source: Different Census Reports

classified and the poorest of the poor do not have access to even this public space. In the words of Park "The processes of segregation establish moral distances which make a city a mosaic of little worlds which touch but do not interpenetrate. (Park.R,1915). In fact homelessness is an immensely complex and multidimensional social problem.

### Homeless Population in India

The homeless or the shelter less are the most neglected group of urban dwellers in India. This neglect is not only on the part of the government but also on the part of researchers, particularly social scientist who have done a lot of research on the poor in urban areas particularly in the slums, but little attention is given to these people who live in the streets and pavements without any roof, livelihood or social security. The census of India defines houseless population as persons who are not living in census houses. The later refers to a structure without roof, hence the enumerators are instructed by census officials to take note of the possible places where the homeless population is likely to live such as on the road side pavements, drainage pipes, under staircase or in open, temples platform and like (Census of India, 1991). According to a study made by Supreme Court on homeless population they have defined homeless population as persons who do not have a house, either self-owned or rented, but instead:

- i. Live and sleep at pavements, parks, railway stations, bus stations and places of worship, outside shops and factories, at constructions sites, under bridges, in pipes and so on;
- ii. Spend their nights at night shelters, transit homes, short stay homes, beggars homes and children's homes;
- iii. Live in temporary structures without full walls and roof, such as under plastic sheets, Tarpaulins or thatch roofs on pavements, parks, nallah beds and other common spaces. (Supreme Court Commissioner's WR, 2011)

They are most vulnerable among the urban poor as they are unable to find shelter even in the slums. The number of homeless population as shown in Table.1 depicts that there is an increase in the number of homeless in urban areas while those in rural areas are on a decline. Since 1991 there has been a marginal decline in homeless or shelter less population in India.

Depending about the residential circumstances and consequences three types of homelessness can be identified in India and in Kolkata namely

- a) The Floating Homeless are those based on physical criterion do not have a roof over their head and where people live on streets, pavements, public space without a permanent shelter and may live with or without their family. In Kolkata they are commonly referred to as the pavement dwellers.
- b) The situated homelessness is those from the physical point of view who live at a particular space and shelter. They may have make shift or semi permanent shelter and illegally occupy public land. They do not have ideal shelter and are often called as the squatters in India and in Kolkata.

- c) The Potential Homeless are those living in slums on sharing basis and may be asked to move out any day and thus become homeless or shelter less.

### **Objectives of the study**

The main objectives of the study is to find out the reasons behind homelessness, their socio economic conditions, how they make their livelihood under such harsh conditions, how they make themselves at home without a roof over their head and how they survive in the city. The study also tries to find out how they have adjusted to the structural changes that are occurring in most of the metropolitan cities which are undergoing urban renewal process.

### **Methodology**

The study is based on primary data obtained from some pavement dwellers from different parts of Kolkata on the basis of a questionnaire schedule and also on the basis of interaction with these families. The study has also been compared to some previous studies made on the pavement dwellers of Kolkata in the 1980's to see if any changes have occurred among the homeless after Kolkata has been going through the process of renewal in the form of fly over's , bridges and other structural changes.

### **Homeless Population in Kolkata**

As the process of development and urban renewal goes on to make cities more beautiful it often clears slums or areas where the poor live. So this accentuates the process of homelessness in cities. On the other hand as the process of redevelopment takes place in the form of bridges and flyovers, it often provides space for the homeless. So there is a symbiotic relationship where on hand clearance takes place displacing poor households and on the other hand as soon structures evolve in the form of flyovers, under pass and so on it is occupied by unauthorized

pavement dwellers. It is like a cat and mouse game between the authority and these homeless populations. In Kolkata too this situation is quite common with the homeless facing the threat of eviction and forceful displacement. The number of homeless population has increased from 48,802 persons in 1971 to 70,000 in 2011 persons according to the census of India reports.

On the basis of interaction with the some pavement dwellers or homeless population in different parts of Kolkata and earlier studies done by KMDA (Mukherjee, 1974) three major areas of their concentration can be identified as shown in Table .2. On the basis of their location their occupation has also been categorized.

### **Results and findings**

The study is based on primary data obtained from 100 pavement dwellers from different areas as represented in the Table.2 i.e. Burabazar area representing the CBD, Sealdah Station and Hedua representing transport junctions and Rash Behari Avenue and Gariahat representing residential area and parks.

### **Socio –Economic Conditions**

A total of 100 samples were taken of which 61 were males and 39 females and majority were in the working age group of 25 to 50 years (Fig.1). Regarding their social relationship it was found that 82 percent were married and this was for security purpose for survival on the street and to escape from other miscreants. Of the sample population of 39 females all except one were married and many were below the age of 18 years (Fig.2). They generally married among the pavement dwellers and other homeless people as they were not accepted in other slum areas for marriage.

Most of the sampled pavement dwellers i.e. 61 percent have come in search of jobs and were

Table.2 Major Concentration of Homeless or Pavement dwellers in Kolkata

Major areas	Occupation
The Central Business District mainly around Barabazar, Janbazar, Babu ghat , Bowbazar, etc	Mainly labour work by providing services in the transport of commodities like collie , hand cart pullers , rickshaw pullers and petty labourers
TheTransport Junctions and Major markets like Howrah and Sealdah Station , Shyambazar, Hatibagan, Hedua etc	Rickshaw and hand cart pullers and vendors like fruit and vegetable sellers
Residential Area , Parks and Open Spaces, mainly in South Kolkata	Service oriented work mainly as maid servants, rag pickers , beggars etc

Source: Field Survey and KMDA Reports

mainly from South 24 Parganas and have come due to poverty or some natural calamity, while 39 percent of the samples pavement dweller were born and brought up in the streets (Fig.3). Among the sample population 45 percent stated that they have with family members and have been staying in the same open space in this city for more than 20 years (Fig.5). These pavement dwellers in Kolkata generally come from Bagnan (Haora), South 24 Parganas, Midnapore, Birbhum and even from Bihar also. (Fig.4)

One interesting thing which came forth during the survey was the fact that 70 percent of the sample population was literate. The male population was more literate that the females and 18 percent had studied above class IV (Fig.6) this is an indication that these homeless people are sending their children to school and many stated that the children go to night schools run by NGO's.

**Occupation**

Pavement dwellers are found to be employed in numerous occupations mostly in informal sector

Table.3 Occupational Distributions of Calcutta Pavement Dwellers

Occupation	Year 1976**	Year 1987**	Year 2012*
Transport	21.9	30	36
Service related	9	13	11
Domestic servant	11.8	5	15
Rag pickers & beggars	21.7	17	20
Other main stream vocation	35.7	35	18
	100	100	100

Source: \*Field Survey, \*\*Jagannathan and Haldar (1988)

in the city. A vast majority earn a livelihood through physical labour, although income levels differ across and within occupational categories. The surveyed pavement dwellers consists of rag and paper pickers, bottle-pickers, rickshaw pullers, maid servant, sweeper, helper, cobbler or more specifically shoe-polisher, coolie, beggars and handcart puller. Some of them are engaged into business like flower, vegetable or even cloth business. Most of these occupations reflect the lack of earning opportunities, and highlight the socially degrading aspects of urban poverty. Among them 3% people are actually unemployed and are dependent on the income of other family members.

It is found that the 51% respondent pavement dwellers support the participation of women in job. The income earning of these women varies from less than Rs1000 per month to more than Rs 3000 per month and most of them about 38% working women earn between Rs 2000 to Rs 3000 and they are mostly maid servant. This picture depicts the social acceptability of women pavement dwellers as workers among the urban households.

**Income**

Among each of the occupational categories, it is observed that there is a wide variation in income levels. Even it is found that majority of the

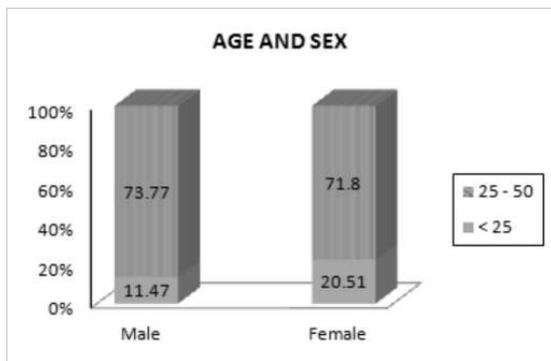


Fig.- 1

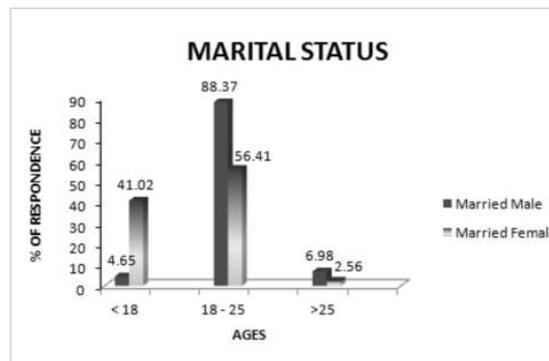


Fig.- 2



Fig.- 3

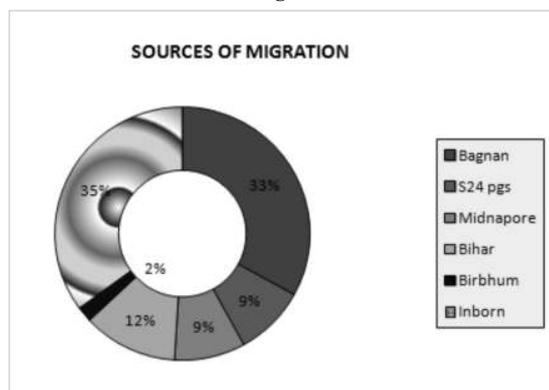


Fig.- 4

pavement dwellers i.e. about 49% have the monthly earning of Rs 4000- Rs 6000 and even 18% earn more than Rs 6000 per month. The rest of the people have either less than Rs 4000 or even less than Rs 2000 monthly income. It is being found that the huge number of family members is dependent on them therefore they face the absolute poverty in the city. The absolute poor are thus having (a) low and unreliable incomes in mainstream vocations and (b) in the marginal sector, in socially degrading livelihood.

Another important finding regarding the job and earning, is that, among the surveyed people 51% of woman are engaged in different jobs with the consent of their family members.. It is also being found that these women who earn which is quite handful to them.25% women earn Rs 1000- Rs

2000 per month while 40% women earn Rs 2000- Rs 3000 per month and about 27% earn more than Rs 3000 per month. The rest of them earn marginally i.e. below Rs 1000 per month. Their working hours are also varied within a range of 2 hours to 5 hours in day. Some of them also work less than 2 hours.

**Livelihood Pattern of Pavement Dwellers**

The livelihoods of pavement dwellers are very harsh. From considering themselves as invisible or unaccountable to census operation to the occupational practice, in every sphere their position is much marginalized. It is found that most of them actually born, brought-up, bred and die in the same place with very little changeover of places. Because of the absence of permanent shelter their place of cooking is beside the road

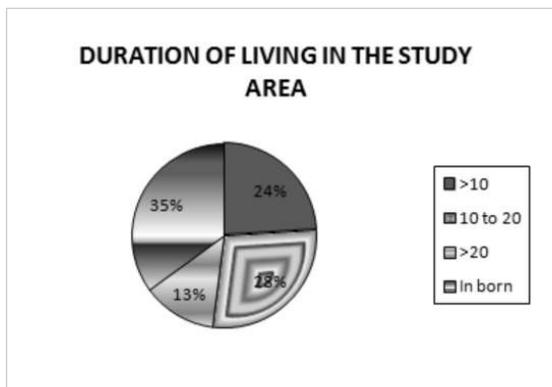


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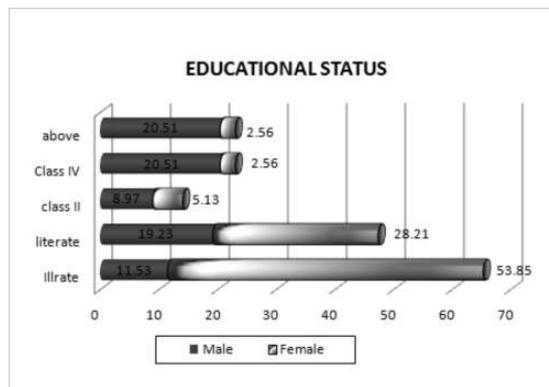


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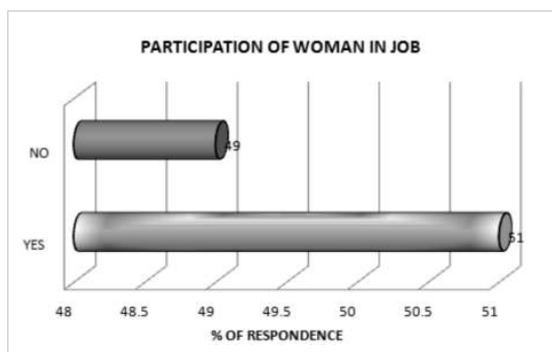


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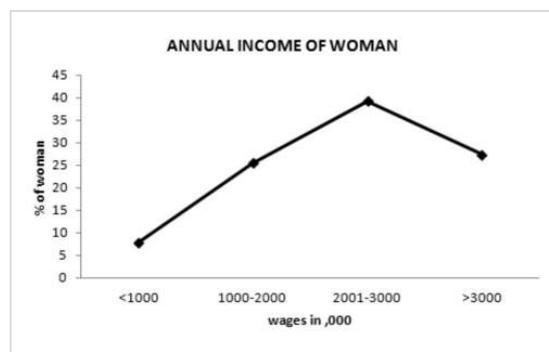


Fig.-8

and mostly in unhygienic condition. Among the respondents, 80% cook outdoor on the road, only 20% who are in a little better of position; they take food regularly from cheap hotels. Most of them dependent on home cooked food; they use wood, paper, plastics, kerosene, bottle as the fuel.

Because of the lower standard of living, education is an indulgence to them. Majority of people about 78% respondents do not send their children to school and believes that their children will follow their footsteps and help the family when they grow up. Only 22% respondents send their children to nearby schools ( Fig12.). In this case also the mid-day meal is the prime pull factor for the parents to send their children to school. Another important issue is found that these

children are mostly being brought up by own. When mothers are out for their regular work, near about 40% children stay alone and the rest of them are either being looked after by other family members or other homeless people in their locality.

The reason behind the fact that pavement dwellers are otherwise known as invisible population is because most of

them do not have the voter's card, BPL card, ration card, access to banking facilities or ATM card etc. Among the surveyed people 46% says they have voter's card, only 1% have BPL card and 28% have ration card. It is also clear that they are mostly not enumerated in census as 95% people are of the opinion that they are not being surveyed by the census accounting people.

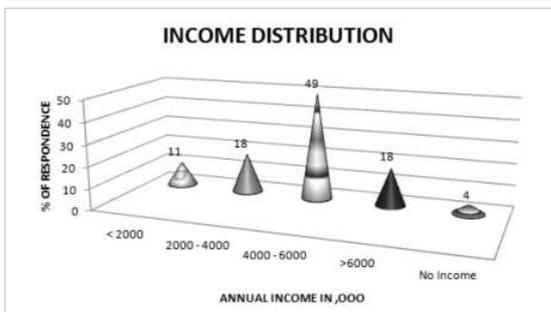


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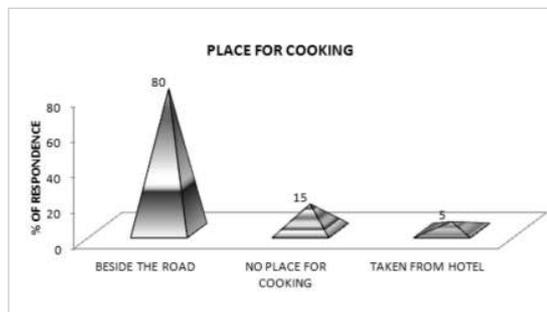


Fig.-10

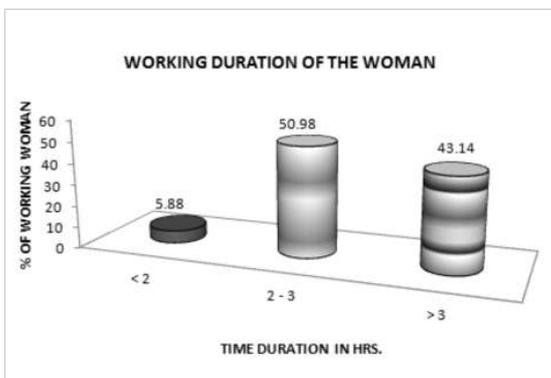


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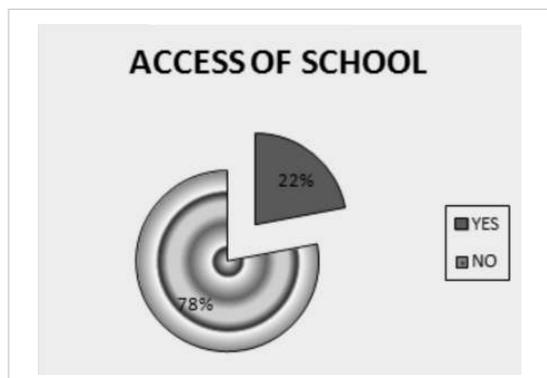


Fig.-12

The main social problem that they are facing is the eviction by police or even eviction by government officials. Such problems make their lives very much insecure and sometimes they have to temporarily move to some other places and by giving bribe only they can come back. In this regard they have lots of complaints regarding government’s role. Not a single person in this regards has the positive mind set rather they have clearly stated that government has totally neglected them by not providing any help in giving shelters, education, job, health facilities, security and many more for daily livelihood.

**Path of Homelessness**

From the detailed study, it can be explained that the homelessness of the urban people occurs due to several factors which include structural as well as economic and social factors. The

limited supply of affordable housing to urban poor, or the change in urban areas due to renewal process or restructuring process or for the cosmetic improvement of the cities make urban poor to face stark reality of homelessness in urban areas, at the same time unemployment, natural calamities or even physical abuse at home compel them to become homeless. (Fig.14).

There is no denying the fact that cities are engines of development for the rich and the powerful contrary to the welfare of the poor and the marginalized. The ‘homeless’ – defined as persons denied of a private roof over their head (even as hutments); persons sleeping or returning to sleep in pavements, road side, platforms or sidewalks with their belongings near their sleeping place or hideouts. But their contribution to the thriving urban economy through their

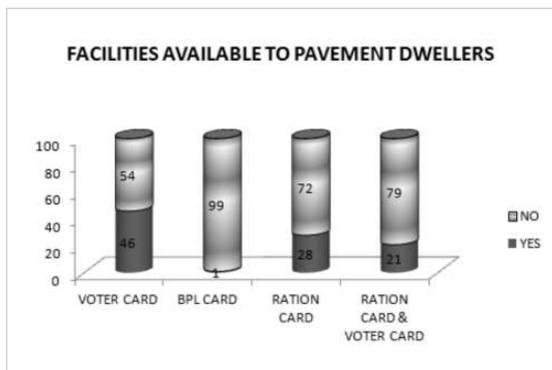


Fig.-13

immense labour force cannot be denied but seems 'invisible' to the state due to sheer negligence. The society by and large frowns upon them, fearing their culture of poverty, branding them 'lazy', 'untrustworthy' and 'criminals'. The sophisticated city dwellers often fail to understand that they are highly dependent on existence of these 'hard working' urban poor for leading a comfortable city life. There is a strong class relation between them with the urban poor being subjected to exploitative relationship within the production systems of the dominant economy. In other words the pool of cheap labour directly or indirectly exists, for the advantage of the rest.

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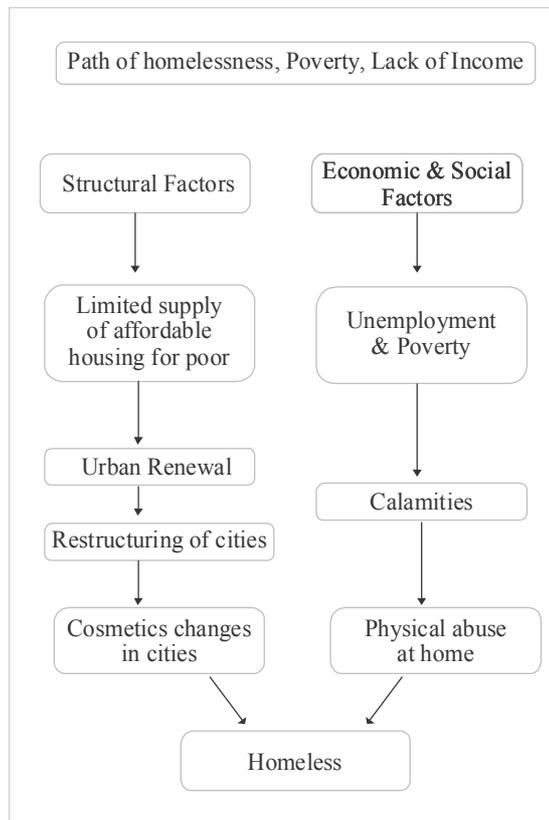


Fig.-14

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