



## Beggary in India: Historical and theoretical perspectives

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### Abstract

The article deals with revisiting the concept of beggary in India. The primary focus has been on examining the religious discourses and sociological narratives which have historically been acclaimed in India. The article also explores the legal framework with regard to the practice of beggary. The study concludes that the practice of beggary has been explicitly discussed in the religious scriptures and texts. The sociological discourse also perceives the practice of beggary as a social concern. Nevertheless, the practice of beggary has been condemned in the religious as well sociological narratives.

**Keywords:** Beggars, religion, society, law

### Introduction

As a concept, beggary is recognized as a condition in which the person in need asks for monetary and/or material including the essential or basic amenities (Reddy 2013). From the sociological perspective, beggary is perceived as a form of social deviance and therefore, a social problem, which includes, but not restricted only to seek material benefit by requesting for money from other persons. The seeker has no commitment or intention to return the cash or to provide any kind of physical or mental service (Sambo 2017) [16]. In other words, begging or panhandling is the practice of pleading others to grant a favour without expectation of reciprocation. Above and beyond money, they may also ask for food, drink, cigarettes or other small items (Malavizhi & Geetha 2016). Thus, begging is generally distinct as the act of stopping people on the road to ask for support (Khan & Shamshad 2014). Beggars possibly can be found in community spaces such as transport routes, city parks, and near busy markets. In fact, the problem of begging is a social nuisance, which has a negative connotation, not only for socio-economic and physical surroundings of the cities, but also for beggars themselves (Fawole, Ogunkan & Omoruan 2011). Therefore, it is also called most sinister evil among all social evils. A. M. Biswas has commented that "the status of a place can be best judged by the number of its beggars". It directs to physical deterioration, mental incompetency, avertable ailment, malnourishment, and inflict lives by forcing them into felony, mental abnormalities, family maladjustments and social irregularities of each description (Kamarappa 1945).

The dilemma of begging is a worldwide phenomenon; it is not weird to any fraction of the country. This problem is noticeable in each urban area of several countries. However, the crisis of begging is considerably higher in one part than in the other (Adedibu & Jelili 2011). There are numerous areas, in which beggars are found, such as filling stations, restaurants, banks, super markets, mosques, churches, etc (Baltazar, Maseke & Dimoso 2012).

Beggars are the poorest of the poor and the most unfavorable segment of the society. Their livelihood is usually in such deprived circumstances that they are even

incapable to accomplish their basic needs of life (food, shelter, health and protection). But the present era, begging has become a profession. Actually, this profession is based on the sympathetic behaviour of the public towards the destitute people (Hasan 2013) [9]. No doubt, beggars are the disadvantaged persons, but up to some extent bulk of them has adopted lots of tactics to accumulate more alms only to save themselves from physical works (Malavizhi & Geetha 2016).

There are numerous factors which stimulate or encourage the practice of begging. Major factors are poverty, religion, physical disability, culture, national disaster, civil war, bad habits (drug, alcohol, and gambling), family heritage, uncontrolled rural to urban migration, and psychiatric disabilities as well as disorders (Khan 2013) [9]. The mere distinction between the begging system of the western countries and in the case of India is in the context of methods of begging. In developed countries, beggars attain money by performing their arts and skills, but in India they are getting money only on the basis of empathy or on the clemency of society (Menka, Khan & Hassan 2014).

### Evolution of begging in India

According to Census of India 2011, there were 413670 beggars and vagrants in India which declined to 6, 27,688 in 2001. In spite of, 20 States and 2 Union Territories of India i.e. Chandigarh and Delhi have either endorsed their own Anti-Beggary Legislation or adopted legislations enacted by other States; the practice of begging still exists in every nook and corner of the country. Legally begging is treated as cognizable and non-bailable offense in India. However, at present, there is no scheme of the Central Government to prohibit the worst practice of Begging [1]. Generally, beggars are called 'bhikhari' in India, and they live on the mercy and charity of the people and earn their livelihood by begging the people of money or basic materials.

India is the place with largest population in the world that goes to bed devoid of any food and deficient of attires to wear (Sailaja & Rao 2016) [15]. Thus, the crisis of begging is deep rooted in the Indian culture. Religious faith also encourages begging due to the belief that it is one way to please the almighty. This myth has encouraged beggars to

inhabit footpaths and steps leading to the religious places whether it is mosque or the temple. Further, begging has been a traditional profession in India as charity is considered as one of the noblest of human virtues according to the Hindu traditions (Menka, Khan & Hassan 2013) <sup>[9]</sup>.

Ancient Indian thinkers acquainted their vision regarding problem of begging. As per the *Yuga* <sup>[2]</sup> theory, the imperative features of ancient Indian thought is the view regarding the deterioration of dharma, righteousness, from *Yuga to Yuga*, from age to age. According to the ancient thinkers, each age has got its own specific virtue and way of life. For instance, according to the great lawgiver Manu, in the *kruta yuga*, the chief asset is tapas, austerity; in the *treat yuga* the chief virtue is jnana, knowledge; in the *Dvapara yuga*, it is yajna, sacrifice and in present *kali yuga*, the chief virtue is *daan* (charity) (Kappuswami 1978).

The Varna theory also stipulates the rules for giving *daan* and for obtaining *bhiksha*. Manu declared that during the recitation of hymns only the members of the Brahmanavarna are entitled to receive *daan*. Conversely, the Kshatriya and the Vaishya are sanctioned only to give *daan*, but are forbidden from receiving *daan*. In addition, Manu advocated the institutionalized charity. He entailed that the king should offer gifts to those who are afflicted by disease, orphans and old age. Besides, the Kautaliya also expressed his views in Arthashastra that "the king shall provide the orphans, aged, infirm, afflicted and the feeble with protection. He shall also endow with nourishment to helpless women, when they are concerning and also the children they give birth to" (Kappuswami 1978).

There are also reference of *bhiksha* in Buddhism and Jainism. The institution of *bhikus* <sup>[3]</sup> in Buddhism and *arhats* <sup>[4]</sup> in Jainism incorporated a cluster of men and women who abandoned the world for the sake of religion and survived on the charity and alms of others (The Encyclopedia of social Work in India, 1968). Among Muslims zakat or alms giving is offered during the Ramzan. According to this system, Muslim kings and rulers dispersed alms and other necessary substances to *faqirs* and to those who had renounced the world (Tomar & Choudhary 2016) <sup>[20]</sup>.

In the Sikh religion, the habit or act of begging or asking alms has been predestined in the *Adi Granth*. Guru Nanak Dev strongly condemned the tradition of begging, proclaiming it as parasitism in society. He advocated the honest labour, honest earnings and help for the indigent and disabled. He argued that a beggar receive no respect in the society. Thus, he contemplated that one should beg only from the Munificent Lord and receive everything desired (Kohli 1992) <sup>[10]</sup>.

Sikh philosophy condemns even those *mystics* who live on begging because such people are actually burden on the society and encourage indolence. They feel no shame in begging from door to door and this shamelessness accompanies them throughout the life. Thus is practice is not considered as respectable as per the Sikh Philosophy (Aalag 2012).

### Concept and perception of begging in India

Begging is an annoyance for any society but for a developing country like India it is not only curse, but a great financial burden too. Additionally, the problem of beggary is not only economic; it also contains social and moral aspects (Sharma 2004) <sup>[17]</sup>. The overseas press and television have put India to disgrace by graphically

screening pictures of beggars fighting like dogs for a few coins, swarming like bees for good left over in hotels and restaurants, naked women sleeping on floor and children sucking. Such sense shows India in very lurid colours. After all, begging involves the beggar displaying his miserable plight by words or actions and requesting for alms by words (spoken or written) or actions (Ramanathan 2008) <sup>[14]</sup>.

As pointed out by Pat Macdonald, begging can be defined as "asking for alms or charity given out of sympathy to the poor" (Kamruzzaman & hakim 2015) <sup>[8]</sup>.

As per the definition of Mysore Prohibition of Beggary Act, 1954, "Begging contains wandering from door to door, soliciting alms, exhibiting or exposing sores, wounds, bodily ailments or deformities, or making false pretence of them for exciting pity for securing alms" (Sharma 2016).

As for the legal definition of a beggar, it can be traced back to the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959 which defines this as anyone, "having no visible means of subsistence and pleading for or receiving alms in communal places where or not under any relevance such singing, dancing, fortune - telling performing tricks and selling articles, exposing or exhibiting any sore, of the purpose of obtaining or exhorting alms. Further it also defines begging to mean exposing or exhibiting, with the entity of gaining or extract alms, any painful, wound, injury, deformity or disease whether of a human being or beast" <sup>[5]</sup>.

The Encyclopedia of Social Work in India (1968) defines the beggars "as charity seeker people, who could easily be noticed by the way they subsist and earn money essential for survival; and bulk among them who are destitute and live in the open or in the impoverished huts".

A Dyutimoy Mukherjee point out that "beggary is an indicator of social disorganization and the extensive custom of alms-giving by individuals and institutions by which the disability, helplessness or social inadequacy of the beggars has been sought to be mitigated in India" (Khan, Menka & Hassan 2013) <sup>[9]</sup>.

Stephen E. Lankenau (1999) <sup>[12]</sup> defines panhandler as "a person who publicly and habitually requests for money or goods for personal use in a face to face manner from unfamiliar others without offering a readily identifiable or valued consumer product or service in exchange for items received" (Lankenau 1999) <sup>[12]</sup>.

Ahmed Pjano in his study *Regional Report on Child Begging, Prevalence, Prevention and Suppression of Child Begging*, reveals that "begging is a social deviance and social problem, which includes gaining material benefit by asking for money from other persons, with no intention to reimburse money or provide the service in return" (Pjano 2011) <sup>[13]</sup>.

The Delhi Commission for protection of Child Right argues that, "Child begging has sometimes been presented as a survival strategy, since children engaged in begging come from impoverished families who do not have an alternative income-generating activity" (Sambo 2017) <sup>[16]</sup>.

According to the Census of India (2001), beggars are "vagrants, prostitutes and person having unidentified source of income and those with unspecified source of subsistence and not engaged in any economically productive work during reference period called beggars" (Menka, Khan & Hassan 2013) <sup>[9]</sup>.

### Concluding remarks

The historical and philosophical analysis of the practice of begging in India explores a number of findings. Firstly, beggary in India has been practiced in India since time memorial. Beggar and begging are formally acknowledged not only in the philosophical narratives but also the socio-cultural discourses. Secondly, significant and equally interesting part of these narratives and discourses is that there are totally different, rather contrary positions with regard to the beggary and beggar. During every historical era and in case of various socio-cultural narratives and discourses, beggary is recognized as unsocial, profane and hence, a forbidden activity. On the other side, beggar is largely perceived not as unsocial or immoral but more as deprived and vulnerable. Thirdly, in the historical context, there is largely similarity and indeed uniformity in the philosophical and sociological positions towards beggary in all regions of India irrespective of the regional, cultural and religious distinctions. Fourthly, the religious discourses condemn beggary but equally advocate merciful approach towards beggars. Above all, the modern legal framework which deals with defining and discussing the legal aspects relating to the practice of beggary, is largely based on the religious postulates of beggary.

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