

Temporary Shelters for the Homeless in Delhi: A Study-based Reflection

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ABSTRACT

Delhi is a city of opportunities but also a city of glaring inequities. The most marginal contours of the urban inequity are inhabited by groups, such as the homeless, that are almost dehumanized and live in subhuman conditions. As the problem of urban homelessness is exacerbating the most shocking aspect of the problem is its manifestation in the everyday lives of the homeless and the inadequate attention it received for a long time from both, the state and the civil society. This research article is an assessment of the temporary shelters put up for the first time in Delhi in the winter of 2010-11 under the aegis of Mission Convergence of Delhi government in partnership with NGOs. The study brings to light, how the temporary shelters, even though grossly inadequate, act as a source of succour to the destitute and homeless who are otherwise forced to live in absolute dearth of any welfare. We discuss the diminished welfare state and the equally diminished capacity of the homeless to expect or claim any welfare. And, finally we dwell briefly upon the possible ways in which we can respond to the situation.

Key Words: Urban Poverty, Homelessness, Temporary Shelters, Mission Convergence

Delhi revels in its brand new ‘world class’ malls, long-winding tentacular flyovers, the metro rail, and the colourful low-floor public buses. The sizeable upper middle class in Delhi follows a lifestyle full of gratifying consumer goods and services. Those on the lower rung of the middle class are also lured by the glitz and dazzle of this new affluent dream of urban everyday showcased in brilliantly illuminated and decorated display windows. Local community markets in middle class localities are fast turning into niche markets catering to similar aspirations. But

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to a very large part of its population Delhi has doled only acute poverty and hardships. Tucked away from the 'happy' urbane sights, into slums on the sides of drains, behind high rise apartments or industrial enclaves and into 'resettlement' colonies on the outskirts of Delhi, are people for whom everyday realities are full of struggle to just make ends meet. (Rao 2010, Dupont 2011)

A part of the city's population that is the most marginalised and disadvantaged- homeless children, women and men can be seen during the day pulling *rickshas* and *thelas*, move head-loads in wholesale markets, work at construction sites, hawk small items at traffic intersections, in markets, on pavements making barely enough to ward off hunger and not enough to put a shelter over their heads. Contrary to the popular discourses that describe the homeless people as lazy and beggars, the city's homeless comprise of largely the migrant, unorganised sector workers who rest or sleep on sidewalks and footpaths, spaces under flyovers, and in the underpasses, when not at work. Their existence is marked not only by extreme poverty and economic exclusion but also social and political exclusion (Harriss-White, 2002). Some temples, *gurudwaras*, mosques and *dargahs* near work spaces provide slightly more humane spaces where spirituality and religion inspired expressions inadvertently put middle and upper classes in situations where they tolerate and even need' the presence of the destitute.

Unlike the slum dwellers, the homeless are not spatially-physically segregated but they are rendered 'invisible' by the city's unwillingness to look at, note and register their 'human-ness' (Jamil, 2006). The city symbolically turns away by carrying on as if these disparities do not exist or mean anything. The state responds alternatively by turning away from the homeless or treating them as if they are not citizens but refugees in their own country. If it was not so unfortunate that human beings have to live in these conditions as *persona non-grata* it would be almost surreal that while the homeless live within the bounds of their own country but as if they have been *exiled* to live among an unsympathetic and even hostile people. This turning away by almost all sections and institutions of society becomes an artfully co-ordinated symphony over whose din you cannot hear the voices of homeless people being completely excluded from the city. The experiences of hunger and callousness of the fellow human beings become the metaphoric spaces in which the homeless reside. In real world not having a permanent space they can belong to homeless find themselves in a situation akin to being urban nomads moving restlessly and endlessly from one sojourn to another.

THE TEMPORARY SHELTERS IN WINTER OF 2010-2011: A TIMELINE

In the last few years it has almost become a routine that the city authorities in Delhi demolish one or two permanent structures meant for night shelters for the homeless. Also, every year in winter death of several homeless people due to the freezing weather hits the news and some raw nerves in the civil society. During the winters in 2010, on 15 December to be precise, Delhi Development Authority (DDA) arbitrarily demolished two night shelters which it had erected last year in compliance to an order by the Supreme Court of India! A death followed and the Honourable Supreme Court took a *suo motu* notice of the matter and told DDA in no uncertain terms to refrain from any such actions. Further, it directed all concerned state secretaries and administrators of Union Territories “to issue necessary instruction within three days and ensure that no life is lost for non-availability of night shelters” (Times of India, Dec 16, 2010).

At this point 64 permanent night shelters were being operated by Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB) which functions under the Delhi government while earlier these shelters were run by Slum and JJ Department of MCD. Another 86 temporary night shelters were erected in the city in response to the Supreme Court directive. To run the (DSUIB, 2010) shelters, NGOs were selected and deployed by St Stephen’s Hospital- the nodal agency coordinating the operation of shelters. St Stephen’s hospital is the Mother NGO for the homeless initiative of the Mission Convergence³ of Delhi Government. On 25 December, 2010 National Human Rights Commission also sent notice to Delhi government enquiring why it had not taken any step to have dedicated shelters for children (The Hindu, Dec 26, 2010). By January 3, 2011 an amount of Rs 7 million was released by the DUSIB for providing beddings to the homeless people in temporary night shelters (Sify.com, January 3, 2011). On February 1, a 24 year old pregnant homeless woman gave premature birth to her child inside a park at Pusa Road traffic roundabout after being beaten by a policeman. The Supreme Court Bench hearing the matter on the state of night shelters in the city pulled up the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board for not providing adequate facilities in the existing

3 Mission Convergence (*Samajik Suvidha Sangam*) is a programme under which Government of NCT Delhi brought together all welfare schemes for the Urban Poor, professedly, for improved impact of these schemes and for effective implementation using government resources optimally. The programme is implemented by different community based organisations designated GRC (Gender Resource Centre) all of which are NGOs. These are facilitated and monitored by nodal organisations called Mother NGO.

shelters and for not providing adequate number of shelters according to the needs pointed out in its Master Plan (The Times of India, February 2, 2010).

These temporary shelters were slated to be shut down by February 28, 2011. Later the shelters received permission to continue till April 21, 2011, which was further extended. There have been some unfortunate events like a fire accident in the Night Shelter at Meena Bazar, Jama Masjid where a child was burnt to death (Indian Express, Jan 28, 2011) and amidst all these happenings, the matter of setting up and running temporary shelters remained hotly debated and contested. It is a mark of progress made in this matter that none of the stakeholders contest the need to have a sustained effort to provide shelter to all. It is also heartening to note that there is agreement on fixing the final responsibility to provide for this basic need to all its citizens with the state.

RAPID APPRAISAL OF TEMPORARY SHELTERS

This paper is an outcome of rapid appraisal of temporary shelters in February-March 2011. As a study aimed at evaluating state of homelessness and services provided to homeless people we feel that we must state out our understanding of homelessness or reasons that render people homeless at the very outset. The United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights establishes the right of every person to have “an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, clothing and housing”. It is a cruel paradox of affluent urban centres in India that such a fundamental human need as a home is denied to large multitudes. While in the currently prevalent governance parlance we set high agendas for infrastructure and industrial development our limited outlook on human development is astonishing.

Causes of homelessness as seen by various stakeholders and commentators in India can be categorized broadly into two different perspectives. One perspective largely held by the majority of policy makers, bureaucrats and even non-governmental organisations, emphasises immediate factors behind individuals becoming homeless, such as drug addiction, mental illness, and domestic or interpersonal disputes. The other perspective, a minority view held by a comparatively less powerful people, identifies the structural reasons, such as lack of accessibility to meaningful employment opportunities, social security, affordable housing, and as a result of increasing deindustrialisation and deinstitutionalisation.

The difference in which reasons we think contribute to homelessness can be crucial in positioning of our critiques of urban policies towards the homeless and advocacy of services and shelters for the homeless population. As researchers and authors of this paper we view the reasons as a complex combination of policies restricting mixed land-use in urban areas, slum demolitions and 'relocation' (Dupont, 2008), anti hawkers and street food rules, lack of social security, absence of laws protecting and regulating work conditions, anti-homeless laws such as Bombay Prevention of Beggary Act (Speak and Tipple, 2006) etc in relation to the demise of the welfare state and the development of neo-liberal political ideologies whereby cities shift their priorities for public spending. At the very least, housing affordability is a challenge of everyday proportions for millions in our country. There is ample evidence that shows a growing income gap and many scholars have conclusively concluded that the (now infamous) assumption about 'trickle-down effect' and the view of development as economic growth which was supposed to lift the fortunes of all Indians does not hold (Sarker, 2009).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Considering that the study sought to assess the temporary night shelters the choice of rapid assessment method almost became a necessity. The night shelters were originally supposed to wind-up by the end of February 2011. We decided to adopt qualitative approach and an exploratory design. We began with a clear intention of coming up with provocative ideas and useful insights that may be able to facilitate a more caring, humane and sustainable approach to the issues related to homelessness in Delhi. The aim was to indicate explanations and gain insight into the relationship between various factors. What we did not want to do was a conventional sample survey to get statistics about the usage of temporary night shelters or percentages of who said what regarding the efficacy of the initiative. This is not to negate that an accurate estimation of the problems and issues is not needed but that within the modest means available to this enquiry these deeper insights would be more valuable than statistics at the first instance.

The team of researchers met the winter rescue team and other programme staff of St Stephen's Hospital- the MNGO for the initiative for the homeless under the aegis of Mission Convergence, to gather a detailed understanding of programme components. The study universe consisted of

all of the homeless population of Delhi who availed these temporary night shelters. The unit of study was a temporary shelter. Twelve temporary shelters were selected purposively from amongst the total of 84 that were put up by the various NGOs as part of the winter response organized and supported by Mission Convergence. Criterion of selection related to the usage of the shelter by the homeless population. We chose shelters that had consistently high or low number of users availing the services. Some shelters were chosen because they seemed to cater more to children and others to women. The occupancy figures from the weekly report of all temporary night shelters of the week between January 10 and 16, 2011 which was the coldest week of the winter, were scrutinised first for this purpose. While studying the occupancy figures for night shelters from the date of their setting up till the third week of February, we noted that the weekly occupancy numbers change but by-and-large the trend remained the same.

Table 1: Study Sample

<i>S.No.</i>	<i>Location of the Sample Temporary Shelter</i>	<i>NGO running the Temporary Shelter</i>	<i>Occupancy (Jan 10-16, 2011)</i>
1	Azadpur Subzimandi	Sampurna	Moderate to Low occupancy (46)
2	Ambedkar Hospital	Nirmana	Lowest occupancy (15)
3	Mansarovar	Humana	Moderate occupants (83)
4	Sarai Kale khan	Manjeet Educational and Social welfare society	Moderate to high occupancy (107)
5	Fountain Chowk	Beghar Majdoor Sangharsh Samiti	Highest number of occupants (148)
6	ND Railway Station	Abhivyakti Foundation	Moderate occupancy (76)
7	Hanuman Mandir	IGSSS	High number of children
8	Yamuna Bazar	SPYM	Moderate to high occupancy (103)
9	Shahdara	Shri Shri Maruti Nandan Sewa	Moderate to high occupancy (92)
10	Motibagh	Khushi	Moderate to low occupancy (45)
11	Dabri	Eight Star Child Care	Relatively high number of women users
12	Janakpuri Flyover	Navlok	Moderate to Low occupancy (46)

As part of the Rapid Assessment Methodology the study used informal discussions, focus group discussion, and spot checks/observation of the temporary shelters as research methods.

Though in many places people used the temporary shelters and rested there even during the day, the research teams visited and collected data only during late evenings and night time so as to get an opportunity to interact with a wider number and, possibly, a wider variety of users. Our focus was to observe and seek possible explanations for our observations. The quest for these explanations required that in the phase of analysis a diverse range of information is unified through interpretation. This is also the reason why the sample consists of cases that show sharp contrasts or have striking features as those are most useful in providing a point of reference for the analysis of the data.

This study, strictly speaking, is not an assessment of either the initiative for homeless in Delhi under Mission Convergence homeless initiative, or the MNGO (St Stephens Hospital), or of the implementing partner NGOs who were responsible for running the temporary night shelters. The winter response of the Delhi Government through Mission Convergence consisted also of the rescue activities at night on the streets through the winter of 2010-11 in addition to the temporary night shelters. We take cognisance of the importance of outreach and rescue activities for the homeless but the study is limited to assessing only the temporary night shelters. This limit manifested itself partially because of the limits of time and resources at our disposal. Partially, also because we decided to direct and focus our enquiry to the Supreme Court's directives to Delhi Government on the state of homeless population in Delhi with reference to the shelters for homeless especially in the winters in 2009-2010 and again in 2010-2011.

We hope that the methods employed in the study have served our objectives well. Also, that our observations, findings, conclusions and recommendations may serve as an active compass indicating some possible future directions to those responsible for and those who are interested in advocating for realisation of human rights of the homeless population as acutely marginalised, disadvantaged but equal citizens of India.

Findings and Analysis

During the winter months of 2010-2011 a considerable and concerted effort on part of judiciary, section of civil society- advocates, activists and NGO service providers was put in to ensure that at least bare minimum

service- a bed and blanket in a temporary shelter is made available to people. Validating the grassroots and advocacy experiences of these providers and advocates, we intend our study to arm them with research findings and insights that they can use to educate and mobilize other providers, community members, and policymakers to work collectively to address this very serious issue in the city adequately. The following are the key findings of this study.

Utilisation

The temporary shelters put up at various strategic locations in Delhi as part of the winter response of Delhi Government's Mission convergence after a Supreme Court directive were for the most part well received and well used. In peak winters most shelters which were centrally located accommodated numbers almost double their capacity. Users at the temporary shelters reported that before coming to the shelter they would sleep on the road dividers, on footpath, under flyovers, or in open spaces like labour chowks, near a place of worship. Some people said that they used to sleep at the railway station before they found about this shelter home. In almost all the cases the shelter in-charge/caretakers (who were also homeless persons themselves in most cases) informed a few of the users about the shelter homes and they further informed others. Most users heard about the shelters by word of mouth.

Profiling Homeless: Users of Temporary Shelters

Most homeless people are young men in the age group of 20-35 years. During the group discussions people said that there are many elderly people among them also. Most shelters were for men.

The shelters were used by a variety of people such as those acutely destitute and not able to work for various reasons. They provided shelter to daily wage workers who cannot afford a roof over their heads. There were homeless who work as rag pickers. The study period coincided with the marriage season and it was found that many homeless men and adolescents worked in marriage parties in catering or in decoration. Some worked as drivers and construction workers. There were also many self employed people- petty shopkeepers, street vendors etc.

Extremely vulnerable homeless population including street children and single homeless women were found using services at some of the sample shelters. Our research team found many homeless families with

women, men and children members using the shelter services. There were also families with no adult male members- only children with mothers or other women caregivers. In our sample we included an only-for-women shelter and another only-for-children home in central Delhi. Single women looking for shelter were sent to the shelter homes in the central Delhi area which had provision for women. While the street children reported that most of them did not like sleeping/resting at these shelters because the adults bully them. From the field observations and the group discussions we can say that we are witnessing in Delhi a first wave of family homelessness- where families (especially single women with young children) are being denied even a *jhuggi* to call home.

Some shelters had a few elderly and physically disabled men among their regular users. A few mentally ill people were also reported to using the services at the shelters. Short duration visitors to the city who are too poor to be able to afford to stay elsewhere also were observed to be using the temporary shelters.

Locale

Shelters near a place of worship, railway stations, labour *chowk*⁴ or a market that had a demand for unskilled labour did well, comparatively. For people working on low wages it makes practical sense to sleep and live near their work place so that they minimise their travel expense and time. Many of these locales are in north and central Delhi. A place of worship in the close vicinity of the shelter becomes the centre of activities of the people living in the shelter as some of them get food in alms from the devotees. Many also find work in food stalls and stalls selling offerings, cleaning the premises etc. The visitors and society at large are more tolerant of existence of destitution in the area as homelessness and destitution provides the well to do devotees an arena in which they can operationalise piety and pity.

The shelter homes near middle class residential areas had to face stiff resistance by the neighbourhood. The care taker of the shelter in the park behind Hanuman Mandir, Connaught Place reported that they had to deal daily with the caretaker of the park who thinks that the shelter is making the park 'dirty'.

⁴ Informal gathering places for casual, usually construction workers to wait till they are hired for a day's wage.

STRUCTURE AND ADMINISTRATION

Initially, when the temporary shelter began, beds were made on the mats on floor but soon after the first winter rainfall, it was realized that cots were needed as the floor became totally damp or even muddy at places. The *takhat* (wooden board cots) were provided in all the shelter homes. Shelters were set up in large canvas tents with two or three rows of cots with mattresses to lie down upon and blankets to cover with.

But the problem was still not completely solved. When it rained, water seeped into the canvas tents soaking the bed and blankets wet. The floor mats became wet and muddy too. Almost all the shelter home visited by the team faced this common problem and many people were forced to leave the damp chilly shelter tents and look for dry places to sleep, for example, under the flyovers etc. At some shelters people tried sleeping on beds in rows placed in the middle of the tent. Some places had heaters but many did not. People slept huddled together, and layered and joined two-three blankets to fight cold. During the discussions people felt that the shelters must be weather ready, if not weather-proof. Although the plastic sheets were put over tents, these got torn soon and easily.

In most shelters people start coming by seven in the evening. However, if they want they can come and relax during the daytime also. They said they feel safe at shelter. It helps if there are no cases of theft in a shelter. In some shelters the managing NGO put up separate tents for those who want to sleep peacefully and separate for those who want to keep awake to talk or were inebriated. At some places there were separate tents for men and women, or separate tents for single men and families. Everywhere people said that this helped increase comfort levels of all involved and decreased possibility of interpersonal conflicts. Families pursue some semblance of privacy with ingenuity at places- a curtain would be put up within the tent separating the families from single men. Space and privacy, thus seem to have importance but when we asked people if they have adequate privacy in the shelters they said they did not need any as they stayed there primarily to sleep and rest only.

People shared that they prefer to live in the temporary night shelter as its rules and regulations are flexible compared to the permanent ones. In the permanent shelter, they have to buy an entry ticket of Rs. 6 and have to keep it safely till their exit. And, if they lost it, the care taker charges the penalty of Rs. 60. Also, the permanent shelter closed by 11pm in the night and those who work late nights or in night shifts find it difficult to find any space for resting.

People like it if the behaviour of the NGO staff is good but again do not complain even when we saw some caretakers talking uncivilly. In case of any fights between users at the shelter the staff members many times have to play the role of mediators and help resolve conflicts. The care taker at only one temporary shelter had some petty cash for any emergency/contingency.

At only one shelter did we see a suggestion box which, we were told, is only opened by higher authorities of the managing NGO. People told us that they never give any suggestions. This has to be seen in the precariousness writ all over homeless existence. Any service- even its just bare minimum is precious and people do not want to criticise it or even point out any room for improvement for the fear that it may be taken away from them. People also told us that they did not require any kind of private space as they were just happy with availability of a clean and safe place to sleep without having to spend money.

At all the shelters, when people come in they have to make an entry of their name, age, phone no, occupation, identification and signatures/initials in the register kept with the shelter in-charge. Our team of researchers did not meet any one who had any document proving or establishing their identity. When asked they said that they have provided all information for an id card but they are still to receive one. The register is updated every day with the details of the people who rest/sleep there.

FACILITIES

Sanitation and Security

At all the shelters we found the tents well lit from inside. Some shelters provided Mosquito repellents (*agarbatti*). All homes had sufficient availability of clean blankets and beds according to capacity of the tent(s). The shelters were swept clean and blankets washed and ironed at varying frequency. Blankets were being ironed in some shelters twice a week to once a fortnight and the tent floor was being swept either once or twice a day.

Only a few shelters had any facility of toilets and drinking water. Women at some shelters shared that this was a problem as it meant that they had to go out at night. Young girls felt afraid and the care takers at some shelters escorted them every time any girl wanted to go to toilet. The shelters did not have provision or budgets to provide for soap etc anywhere. People reported not keeping many things with them as even

those who could buy items of basic necessity have no place to keep things. At some shelters people deposited their money with the caretaker for safekeeping through the night and took it back in the morning.

Health: Services and Information

Residents of all shelters reported mobile medical vans from St Stephens' Hospital visiting twice a week for health checkups. Some of the people who had any symptoms that needed further investigation were sent for tests etc. For example people with persistent cough all night had their chest x-rays done and given treatment after diagnosis of tuberculosis. In case of emergency, people go to the nearest hospital on their own. Some shelter in-charges knew that St Stephens' Hospital can also provide for ambulance and they arranged for it when needed. First aid box and medicines for minor illnesses were not found in most shelters.

Very few shelters had information available regarding drug de-addiction services. The users felt that shelter homes can be looked upon as a clearing house for various useful information and messages to the homeless population. Contacts for referral services may be made available to those who wish to go for de addiction

Recreation and Entertainment

Some homeless families suggested that there should be some provision for entertainment, play activities and teaching- for children with them. This would also engage children who could then stay back and study while their caregivers go out and work. But most other people when asked about provisions for recreation or entertainment at the shelter, said that did not feel any need. They said most people came there either tired or drugged; they just need a blanket to sleep.

Hunger

Hunger is a common refrain. Many homeless people who are unemployed and have nothing to prove their identity find it tough to find adequate work that can get them two square meals a day. Even those who are employed are mostly unskilled and grossly underemployed. Families, single women with small children, and destitute street children too have tough time with hunger. This is also one reason why many homeless people crowd around places of worship. They find sporadic work, children

sell balloons etc, but many times the little money, whenever made is also spent by many to fund their drug dependence. Almost everybody we met shared their experiences of similar hardships. In one instance a sensitive caretaker of a temporary shelter was bringing food from home for a few destitute homeless staying at the shelter. He wondered for how long he could continue to do so. In another shelter the HNGO was providing people with tea and biscuits once a day. When our teams asked the people regarding the (possibility of) provision of meals at the shelters they agreed that that it would be of immense value but again felt hesitant if they could even ask for it from the government. The aspect of state as welfare state responsible for well-being of *all* its citizens and not just the well-off, has clearly never touched the life of the homeless citizens of the state.

IN CONCLUSION: APPRECIATION & APPREHENSION

With this study we aimed turned the spotlight on the most neglected aspect of urban poverty and exclusion- Homelessness in the city. Despite the fact that the homeless population has grown tremendously in the last ten years, those concerned with the issue and experiencing it along with those activists and service providers building solidarities have witnessed the continuing decline of resources and housing opportunities for the poor, homeless and shelterless in the city.

Especially during the last few years of preparations for Commonwealth Games, Delhi has experienced the capability of the government agencies to bring about the huge quantum of change only through sheer political will. In short span of just a few months and even a few weeks, huge flyovers, foot over bridges, kilometers of shiny pavements came-up in parts of the city. This same political will was also mobilized to uproot thousands of families in the name of beautification and national pride. We feel impelled to ask why the same political will cannot be mobilized to stabilize and strengthen destitute citizens of the country who find themselves excluded and marginalized from any kind of civic rights and amenities in the city.

It is an indicator of not only the decline of the welfare state that the most disadvantaged of its citizens have the least expectations from it. Even a minimalist initiative like the winter response shelter homes of the Mission Convergence have been well received by the homeless people as it fulfilled the most immediate and important need of people sleeping rough on the city streets. They were very appreciative of even the limited

facilities which saved them from the cold and day to day harassment by police. They appreciated the fact that shelters were open round the clock. People shared that they are very happy with the steps taken by the Government and will prefer if these shelters were not removed but become permanent. The tents, facilities provided were not nearly adequate for the users but were desperately needed by the homeless population which has hardly ever received any facilities from the state as recognition of their citizen status. This was reflected in the fact that when we invited people to give feedback to improve the initiative they were reluctant and afraid that their feedback may be construed as criticism that may be used to support any argument for scrapping it altogether.

We would like to highlight that the main strength of the temporary shelters was that they allowed people to stay, sleep, rest any time of the day and not just at night which is the case with the night shelters (*raen basera*) with permanent structures and that they maintained order, warmth, and cleanliness even as it was at a most basic level and very difficult to do during the rains. Those shelters were most appreciated that had responsible caretakers/administration, provided for security of belongings and earnings, made basic provision for first aid, access to treatment of minor ailments and more serious illnesses, and were located strategically near workplaces of the users.

We also strongly feel that it needs to be highlighted that a personal touch or sensitivity shown by individuals at different levels of implementation made some of the temporary shelters more accessible, welcoming and humane spaces. When people using services at a shelter got a chance to engage in some activity together- playing games, listening to radio, playing *dholak* (a simple drum) and singing together etc- they developed a bond with each other. People at such shelters shared that they did not like to use any other shelter as they enjoyed the companionship and camaraderie at this shelter. Most shelters were well lit from inside but people said that shelters would be more prominent, accessible and welcoming if they are also well lit from outside. One of the shelters had a mirror put up by the staff of HNGO, another shelter sported a banner that read *beghar ka ghar* (home of the homeless). These minor details gave shelters a humane touch and character, and were much appreciated by all.

WHAT CAN MAKE THE SITUATION BETTER?

The situation for the shelterless in the city demanded this sort of emergency response to avert what has the potential to become an urban structural

disaster. But the word ‘temporary’ should give way to transit shelters which should have easier to maintain and cost effective *permanent structures*. It is the duration of people’s stay at these shelters that should be ‘temporary’ and not the shelter itself. We must aim for a situation that people use the transit shelters to stay for a sufficient duration of time before they can make a move to more stable housing.

The issues of homeless cannot be seen in isolation and separately from issues of social security. The discourses and debates on homelessness need to be set in the context of right to food, right to work and right to adequate housing for them to have any meaning at all in term of bringing in change. In this regard, organisations and activists need to reorient their understanding of the issues and familiarise/adapt themselves to a human rights based approach. Capacity building and perspective building are activities that cannot be undermined in the present scenario. Having said that, we labour to emphasise that humanitarian assistance that allows those affected by extreme poverty and marginalisation to re-establish a “life with dignity” is acceptable; good-hearted generosity and contributions may be necessary in some situations even though we whole heartedly agree that they are not sufficient. Towards this end the NGO initiatives may strive to approach the issue with a broader and more eclectic viewpoint. This eclectic approach may combine building philanthropic assets and processes, with community development and strong advocacy efforts on all fronts.

In similar vein, the urgent need for affordable housing that displays understanding of the realities and needs of the urban poor who are essentially unorganized sector workers, cannot be overemphasized. It is also equally imperative for the various stakeholders to come together and create an effective and comprehensive safety net for those individuals and families who are at risk or brink of homelessness.

Because we do not foresee any possibility of revolutionary change in the public policies on the matter concern in the immediate or even near future we also must strive to recognise the harshness of everyday homeless existence. Towards this end we have to accept that the temporary shelter component plays only a very limited role in helping homeless people off the streets. Truth is that homeless population needs more wide-ranging services to offer a sustained support in order to enable them to come out of destitution and homelessness. Services offered at the shelters may expand to include, but not be limited to, a needs assessment counselling (job and therapeutic), life skills program, clothing, personal hygiene items, medical prescriptions, referral services, meals, and shower and laundry facilities.

A first step towards this may be through instituting transit shelters for individuals and families run by civil society organisations. The permanent structures and administration of transit shelters for short stay may be funded by a Public Shelter Grants Program, in the same way that hostels etc for other marginalised sections of society such as scheduled castes and tribes, and minorities are funded through various government programmes. More than just managing and providing basic shelter and medical services, the NGOs can also provide referral services and the MNGO can act as a clearing house of information for public and voluntary agencies assisting the homeless.

Till the time that transit shelters are not instituted with expanded service base, the temporary shelters must continue to avert human made urban disasters all the year round in Delhi.

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