



# AN INTERNATIONAL APPROACH TO HOMELESSNESS. PART I: THE CASE OF INDIA

Międzynarodowe podejście do problemu bezdomności:  
Część I: Przypadek Indii



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## Abstract

This paper, the first in a two-part study on homelessness in developing countries, explores the causes of homelessness in countries with significant populations living in poverty. This instalment focuses primarily on homelessness in India. The country's diversity in terms of culture and religion is reflected in challenges when approaching issues related to homelessness. We highlight governmental initiatives to combat homelessness and provide impoverished people and families with access to essential services. A qualitative research method was used. We interviewed the recipients of government services aimed at helping their families overcome homelessness. Our findings highlight the role of education and educational programs in breaking the cycle of poverty. We also compare the approaches to homelessness in the United States and India, the programs, and the challenges to assist individuals and families. The research also finds that people who migrate from one place to another to find employment are economically vulnerable and build makeshift shelters wherever they find a place. We explain how this process gradually leads to the formation of slums – condensed, crowded places where residents lack basic amenities and resources. We also examine how local organizations help people by providing services such as food distribution during festivals and clothing from NGOs. We conclude that providing long-term services and benefits to individuals and families is helpful in eliminating poverty. Furthermore, resource acquisition and collaboration between organizations and government bodies are essential for addressing systemic barriers to reduce homelessness.

## Streszczenie

W niniejszej pracy, która jest pierwszą z dwóch części poświęconych problemom bezdomności w krajach rozwijających się, omawiamy przyczyny bezdomności w krajach o znaczącym odsetku ludzi żyjących w biedzie. W tej części skupiamy się przede wszystkim na problemie bezdomności w Indiach. Sytuacja ludzi biednych i bezdomnych zależy od miejsca, w którym się znajdują, oraz od uwarunkowań kulturowych i religijnych. Rząd stara się ograniczać bezdomność, wprowadzając różne formy pomocy, oferowanej ludziom znajdującym się w skrajnej biedzie. W celu poznania skuteczności i zasięgu pomocy rządowej przeprowadziliśmy badania jakościowe i wywiady z osobami korzystającymi z takiej pomocy. W pracy omówiono znaczenie edukacji i programów oświatowych dla przerwania międzygeneracyjnego cyklu biedy. Porównano pomoc okazaną jednostkom i rodzinom w wychodzeniu z bezdomności w USA i Indiach. Opisano zjawisko migracji ludzi w poszukiwaniu pracy, które przyczynia się do zwiększenia liczby osób znajdujących się w kryzysie bezdomności. Osoby bezdomne budują tymczasowe schronienia, które po pewnym czasie nabierają form rozległych slumsów pozbawionych podstawowych warunków bezpieczeństwa życia i higieny. Mieszkańcom slumsów pomagają instytucje pozarządowe, dostarczając żywność i ubrania, szczególnie w trakcie tłumnych obchodów wydarzeń społecznych i religijnych. Organizacja lokalnych zasobów i współpraca między rządowymi i pozarządowymi ośrodkami pomocy stwarza warunki umożliwiające ludziom wychodzenie z bezdomności.

**Keywords:** migration; poverty; social work; diversity; slums

**Słowa kluczowe:** migracja; bieda; praca społeczna; różnorodność społeczna; slumsy

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## Introduction

People are homeless because they cannot afford to pay for living space. Many systems of social welfare designed to help people obtain and maintain housing have demonstrable limitations in their effectiveness and long-term stability. Systems in certain geographical areas, especially during periods of social unrest (epidemics, natural disasters, war), are often overwhelmed by the rising numbers of people without shelter. Homelessness negatively affects people who are subjected to it and has an effect on the wider environment where unhoused people live. Tourists generally react negatively to seeing people living on the streets when they travel [1]. Homelessness also costs money, particularly when cities try to make the homeless disappear when they wander in the public spaces. However, there are researchers who believe that ending homelessness, although expensive, in the end, saves money [2].

Each homeless person presents a different history of becoming homeless. Such history depends on the community they are part of and the country they live in, with its economy and culture. The main cause of homelessness is poverty, which may arise from health conditions, unemployment, and factors related to gender, relationships, violence, poor education, a lack of social support, citizenship status, stigma, social exclusion, and discrimination [3]. There is an interdependence between homelessness and poverty; people without a permanent address face barriers to improving their health and economic status. Homelessness contradicts basic human rights, including the rights to adequate housing, food and water, health, education, and non-discrimination. It reflects the failure of the welfare state and the poor decisions of governing bodies [4]. In short, it is the responsibility of society as a whole to eradicate homelessness; those who have lost housing should not be blamed.

People who are homeless can often be categorized into groups with their own special characteristics. Some of them are transiently homeless and able to gain and maintain income and housing within a relatively short time. But the so-called chronically homeless may remain unhoused for several years. They usually suffer from mental illness and/or different forms of social marginalization. This second group is the most costly to society because they use expensive emergency health services and specialized community care management without any resolution of their situation [5].

The significant use of community resources in the care of the chronically homeless has resulted in the development of an approach that provides housing first and then offers essential services while individuals remain stably housed. This approach is known as the "Housing First" model. Many communities and countries use this approach for all homeless populations. For example, Finland has been able to house all who needed housing using this strategy. Other countries that have been able to create successful systems of governmental and non-governmental support for the homeless are Japan and Denmark. New research suggests that the best programs simultaneously promote health and address disparities while offering a version of the Housing First model [5].

However, there are states with large populations, such as India, Nigeria, and the United States, that are unable to apply the Housing First model for everybody who needs it due to financial constraints. The problem of the absolute number of homeless overwhelms many social welfare approaches. In this work (Part I), we present the case of India to illustrate the reality of how one society attempts to support its homeless population. In Part II, we discuss available options for resolving the problems of homelessness in low-income countries with large populations.

## Goals and methods

Both authors worked in the Comprehensive Homeless Center (CHC) of the Cleveland Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). CHC VA uses several approaches to help unhoused veterans. One of the most successful is the HUD-VA Supported Housing (HUD-VASH) program, in which housing is provided through the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) together with professional support from VA social services [6]. This model, although very successful [7], is also one of the most expensive programs known to the authors. This raises the question of what methods are used in low-income countries with high populations of people who might be homeless or at risk of homelessness. We decided to study the case of India, a country with an overwhelming population of unhoused people, and evaluate the most promising social actions that could lead to eliminating homelessness. Both authors know the situation in India through personal encounters and from research. Lanjewar was able to interview individuals from India about their experiences of government assistance in helping them to move out of homelessness. We felt that the knowledge we gained in India was closely related to its history and culture, and we decided to compare how other countries with different backgrounds and cultures deal with similar challenges related to homelessness. We found out in our earlier studies that a comparative analysis of social problems across different cultures may uncover broader general phenomena that otherwise stay invisible [8]. Our experiences and cross-cultural comparison results will be presented in the second part of this study.

Both articles are the result of studies conducted by two immigrants working with the unhoused population in the U.S. and comparing their thoughts and perspectives on homelessness in one of the wealthiest countries in the world. We wanted to show both the commonalities and differences in each of the countries we studied, focusing on the lived experiences of homelessness and societal strategies to eradicate homelessness. Just as each individual's story of becoming unhoused is unique, the national response to help the homeless also varies. Each government addresses homelessness by trying to prevent it from occurring, building affordable housing, and creating social support systems, including public benefits. Offering housing to the unhoused is always the most effective strategy, but many communities and countries cannot afford such an approach, and sometimes other methods (like mental health and employment support) may be even more suitable.

## Homelessness in India

Homelessness remains a challenge in India. The Indian government defines the homeless as “those who live on roadside pavements, in Hume pipes, under flyovers and staircases, or in temples, and railway platforms, or other open spaces” [9]. In contrast, under the UN General Assembly, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) defines homelessness as applying to “those who do not live in a regular residence due to lack of adequate housing, safety, and availability” [10]. People face homelessness or live below the poverty line because of several reasons such as unemployment, the lack of affordable housing, migration from rural areas to cities, discrimination, insufficient government support, and situational needs.

When talking about India, we must address religion and the caste system. A report from the Union of Catholic Asian News provides a good understanding of the statistics of marginalized or minority communities, such as Muslims, tribal peoples, lower castes, and Dalits, who were historically labeled “untouchables”. Individuals and families belonging to these sections are predominantly sanitation workers; they are largely restricted to menial occupations traditionally considered “unclean”, including scavenging, scrap metal collection, butchering, rag picking, labor, and the leather industry [11]. These classes remain below the poverty line and migrate from one place to another in search of work, with no permanent place to stay. Significantly, there is a generations-long chain in these societies, with children following the same path as their fathers. Among the reasons for this persistent, generational homelessness are limited access to education, lack of awareness and opportunities, ongoing discrimination, the use of alcohol and drugs, and involvement in crime.

The survey conducted by the Indo-Global Social Service Society (IGSSS) in May 2019 discussed the caste-related aspect of homelessness. It showed that 80% of the homeless population belonged to SC (Scheduled Caste), ST (Scheduled Tribe), or OBC (Other Backward Class). This data was pulled from a few states, including Bihar, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala. One of the themes that came out of the survey was the intergenerational cycle of poverty that contributes to homelessness. Among these groups, homeless women experience malnutrition, mental illness, other diseases, and high-risk pregnancies [10]. Those living below the poverty line and at risk of becoming homeless by migrating from place to place often pass on these issues to the next generations.

Some of the homeless statistics are not recorded because individuals live in remote locations in rural areas without technology. Urban societies and the government of India have defined several types of rural homelessness. For instance, individuals who live in relief camps due to various causes like natural disasters, communal riots, political conflicts, etc. are known as displaced persons. Another category includes migrants who make their way to urban locations because of land scarcity or poverty. There are also seasonal migrations from villages to cities, and sometimes during festivals, to earn money. Migrants may stay in urban centers, while the rest of their families stay

in rural areas. A somewhat similar category of homeless individuals is itinerant groups who have no fixed address and are usually tribal groups or individuals engaged in religious worship. Beggars, a popularly used word for homeless individuals in India, also include those who live in settlement houses or leprosy colonies. Those who live in overcrowded or insecure dwellings with others are classified as homeless while living with other people in the same household [12].

The popular newspaper *The Wire* [13] has presented information about the homeless population in various districts. Around 80%, or 640 of 797 districts in India, were included in the newspaper’s research. Most of the rural areas of India that contribute to homeless populations are in the western and southern parts of the country. *The Wire* also points out that homelessness is growing rapidly in urban areas. Moving to big cities is a way to raise the standard of living and work opportunities. This increases population density and cultural diversity; however, not every migrant or every family of a migrant obtains employment sufficient to live comfortably. Individuals are often found performing labor work with daily wages, selling handmade items/souvenirs at traffic signals, or living on the street in makeshift tents with families. They lack arrangements for water, proper lighting, food, cooking space, bedding materials, safety, hygiene, and children’s nutrition. When the growing number of families with similar conditions becomes visible, the perception of metropolitan areas changes. Major cities with such conditions include Kanpur, Kolkata, Mumbai, Surat, Delhi, and Hyderabad.

In general, women, children, individuals with disabilities, and migratory workers are adversely impacted by homelessness in India. Homelessness contributes to poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and poor health. The homeless population in India faces challenges at all levels, for example, health concerns, individuals and families living on the street, *kaccha* houses (made of mud, leaves, plastic sheeting, and bricks without cement), and unsanitary or uninhabitable environments that make the homeless vulnerable to illness. Malnutrition in children is an existing problem that becomes even more complicated when a family is homeless.

As discussed earlier, migrants and their families live on the streets, working for daily wages which only fulfill the needs of the day, and they face poor living conditions with limited or absolutely no resources and support from the community. This lifestyle leaves a great impact not only on families themselves but also on their children, who follow a similar path to make their living due to lack of exposure, unlike children in stable families. This chain can continue for generations [14]. Homelessness occurs because of several factors, including physical and mental disabilities. Moreover, poverty and the acquisition of the lands of families in rural areas by large or government-affiliated institutions are significant causes of homelessness. Poverty as a cause of homelessness in India is well-known. People living in poverty make less money compared to other individuals in the community. Individuals are dependent on daily income just to survive. Some of the most common occupations where individuals live below the poverty line include street vendors, rag pickers, scavenging, rickshaw pullers, per-day laborers, etc. [15].

Individuals and families spend years and years living in shacks, on the streets, or in rooms covered with large plastic sheeting. Migrants from different places in India make their own arrangements in ways that gradually form slums. They lack adequate housing and face economic disparities. This is simply urban homelessness. The social stigma surrounding the lifestyle of people in slums or on the streets leads to discrimination, later associated with disparities in education, government benefits, and medical services. All these disparities reinforce the cycle of poverty.

After COVID-19, many people lost their jobs, which also impacted homelessness due to unemployment. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), around 7 million jobs were lost during the COVID wave; thus, the national unemployment rate in April increased to 8 percent from 6.5 percent in March [16]. According to the CMIE, “approximately 18 million jobs were lost during this pandemic” [15]. Unemployment in the middle class makes it difficult for individuals and families to make a living and fulfill the basic needs of life. It pushes them into poverty, which eventually leads to homelessness. Due to unemployment, affording basic necessities, such as food and clothing, has become difficult, as prices rose after the pandemic. Migrants returned to their homes, which put them in an even tougher situation due to limited food supply versus more demand at home. The motivation and focus on buying a house shifted to obtaining enough food for the families, maintaining health, fulfilling basic needs, and at the same time, finding employment.

Natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, droughts, and other events have been major causes of homelessness. As a result, individuals and families are displaced from their permanent homes because of property destruction, loss of belongings, and limited access to essential services such as food, electricity, and communication networks. Displacement makes the situations of individuals and families in poverty even worse. Homes in some areas may be washed away by sudden heavy rains or floods. People may be forcefully evacuated by the authorities to avoid further losses [17].

Chronic mental illness and substance use/abuse are two of the major causes of homelessness worldwide. India is not an exception. Poor mental health can potentially lead to loss of employment, relationship conflicts, social problems, addiction to substances, chemical dependency, etc. It is devastating for individuals and families living in poverty or below the poverty line. In 2017, the Delhi government and the Drug Dependence Treatment Centre, AIIMS, reported that around 7,900 street children were found to be addicted to inhalants; 9,000 abused alcohol; 5,600 consumed cannabis; and over 1,200 consumed heroin and opioids [15]. Although research is limited, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in India reported in 2017 that 6–7% of people in India faced some sort of mental illness.

In some societies in India, domestic violence is still at its peak [18]. One of the common reasons behind it is the dowry system [19]. The dowry system refers to the custom of the bride’s family offering cash, movable property,

or goods to the groom upon marriage. Communities in villages with this tradition and culture demand dowry during marriage. In fact, in some cases, dowry is a prerequisite to get married. Families who fail to fulfill this demand, and women from these families, tend to be subjected to domestic violence and mental torture by the husband’s family. This results in women leaving or abandoning their homes. They cannot even return to their parental homes since there is a popular traditional saying “Betiya para ya dhan hoti hai”, meaning that daughters are someone else’s wealth, an expression of patriarchal family values. When daughters are born, it is believed that they will not carry the family line forward since they have to marry and leave their parents’ house. It is expected that boys will take on the responsibility for continuing the family generation. This is how women are raised in families in areas that are deeply rooted in their traditions and culture. In such situations, women often end up staying in temporary shelters and utilizing voluntary services.

Land ownership in rural areas plays a key role in the socioeconomic development of societies that fall under these religious categories. Dalits and other backward classes are commonly subjected to losing land in rural areas, either for governmental projects or under the umbrella of city development. The government generally compensates people when taking their land. However, this leaves a long-lasting impact, because the sale of property affects their financial stability for the future. The interesting fact about landownership is that it is not necessarily related to government projects. Those in the higher socioeconomic classes also purchase lands for investment. Looking at the caste hierarchies and disparities in India, the upper-class lobby, which includes Brahmins and other Hindu castes, holds a significant share in land ownership. Poverty in India is a generational buildup of a variety of circumstances in individuals’ and families’ lives that either leads to success or living below the poverty level for years and years. The buying and selling of land is one aspect of inequality that increases the poverty level.

People in urban and rural communities have different approaches and responses to addressing homelessness in India. The ideology of feeding the hungry is quite popular and also an important part of religious practice. During major festivals, for example, Navratri, Diwali, Ganesh Chaturthi, Buddha Purnima, Rama Navami, Ambedkar Jayanti, and many more, the communities organize Langar Seva, the custom of free food distribution to the people who attend festivals. For homeless people, it is a great opportunity to obtain food, often something long-desired. Some community and society groups, either on a monthly basis or every certain number of months, provide donations in cash and non-cash resources to individuals on the streets or in shelter organizations. These could be clothes, amenities, food, organizational programs that are beneficial to individuals and families, and educational materials for children. These are all short-term solutions that meet the immediate needs of the people, rather than sustainable solutions to poverty. We still need long-term goals and preparation to work toward ending poverty and homelessness, and the government plays a significant role in the process.

### Actions to eliminate homelessness

Both central and local governments, along with non-governmental and community organizations, are aware of the causes of homelessness and have taken a range of measures to reduce it. The Indian government launched the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) initiative for its poorest citizens, those living in shelters and migrants. Under this scheme, food grains are provided at highly subsidized rates to the BPL (Below Poverty Line) card holder/sections. This scheme is targeted to reduce hunger among the poorest of the poor in India. Cardholders get rice, wheat, pulses, and fuel at lower prices. The card also provides access to health, education, and housing benefits programs intended for low-income families. Furthermore, in the occurrence of natural disasters or economic downturns, the scheme provides cardholders with immediate assistance and safety-net support. The subsidized scheme is operated throughout the country with the help of local authorities that reach out to families or vice versa [20].

NGOs in different states, cities, and districts in India play a significant role in supporting individuals and families living in shelters and on the streets, those who are migrants, and those living below the poverty level. Some NGOs operate independently of the government, operating social missions and providing volunteer services. Salam Baalak Trust, in Delhi, runs four shelters that can accommodate up to 220 children. Some of the services they provide include food, education, and healthcare. This NGO also offers skill development classes that can be helpful for children for future employment [21].

Mental health practice and the awareness around it are still limited in some parts of India. Promoting mental health and education among students, communities, and NGOs by organizing outreach services, community workshops, campaigns, educational seminars, etc., would be helpful to serve homeless individuals and families [22, 23]. Graduate programs in fields such as psychology could incorporate field practicums focusing on homelessness and mental health, providing students with opportunities to reach out to homeless individuals and meet them where they are.

The current Modi government has come up with a few new schemes since 2016 to boost employment in India. However, there is limited data supporting the success of these programs. Make in India is one of the programs created to generate employment in sectors like manufacturing. However, some economists argue that strict land acquisition laws and inflexible labor regulations make it challenging for investors [24]. Digital India is another scheme that focuses on automation and encourages entrepreneurs to create home-based jobs and online businesses. However, at present, India is a developing country and is still moving towards technical advancement. Many IT companies, for example, Tech Mahindra, HCL Technologies, and WIPRO, have slowed the hiring of new employees. This is also one of the barriers to promoting Digital India schemes. The Modi government also introduced a program called Start-up India, involving banks that were encouraged to provide finance to entrepreneurs to start their businesses. Pre- and post-COVID-19, due to this

program, many employees left their jobs and turned to entrepreneurship; however, as many start-ups failed, they became unemployed [24].

Those affected by migration, natural disasters, or living below the poverty line often lack shelter to make a decent living and formal identity to acquire government services. The Indian government provides old-age assistance, and the Public Distribution System offers food and unemployment allowances through a program under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGA). Moreover, the Shelter for Urban Homeless (SUH) scheme provides shelter to impoverished urban populations. Some of the provisions in the program include all-weather permanent shelters open 24 hours a day and a permanent community center for at least 100 people for every 1 lakh population. Each shelter caters to 50–100 individuals, depending on local conditions [25].

### Help for families

Families living in poverty can hardly envision their and their children's future due to a lack of resources and support. The government established a scheme to alleviate poverty and help families build strong and permanent houses with basic amenities. The initiative is popularly known as "Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana Gramin (PMAY-G)"; it was previously called "Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY)", named after the late former Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi. This scheme aims to provide houses for families living in dilapidated homes and without permanent housing. The PMAY-G assists families by bridging the housing deficit and providing physical, emotional, and mental stability. To learn more about this program and how it helps families to become stronger in society, I reached out to Shubham, a young adult from the state of Maharashtra, India. Shubham's father died when he was in college, and he was the sole breadwinner in the house. He had to leave his dreams behind and begin earning money for the family. His household was among those in Maharashtra that benefited from the PMAY-G scheme. Shubham explained: "Having a permanent house means a lot to me. When I saw that my house was built and ready, it felt like thousands of pounds had been removed from my shoulders. I am the only son at home, and I have two sisters, so I was worried about how I would manage my salary to get the house and then provide support for my sisters' marriages in the era of inflation." This was his first response; it made me even more curious to explore his experiences revolving around the scheme and government support. I attempted to focus on the additional aspects that had to be covered, such as emotional and mental health balance related to housing. He stated: "When I was a teenager, I did not understand how my father struggled and worked hard to carry the family. I would not have understood the pain of my father if he had been alive and built a house for us that I am feeling now. My sleep has never been peaceful since my father's death. Now it has been a few months since I have my home, and I can sleep without being worried about building a house. This is a huge help for me and my family." Shubham's story was overwhelming; he spoke frankly about the practical effect of the PMAY-G program.

There are certain qualifications and requirements that a family must fulfill before obtaining assistance from the government under this scheme. These include household income criteria or inclusion in groups such as the Economically Weaker Section (EWS), Low Income Group (LIG), Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes. Once families receive approval for housing, they must start building the foundation of the house and follow up with the authority to receive funds for completing the house. The reason is that even though the state and the central government provide funds to families, they receive money in installments once the level of construction of the house is provided as proof.

### **Education as a fundamental condition to break the cycle of poverty**

One major barrier to education is the lack of resources to obtain quality schooling without having to worry about financial burdens. In many rural or urban-rural areas in India, ZP (Zilla Parishad) schools have been established to provide education for children from the 6th to the 10th grade. These schools are run by state and local authorities that provide services like uniforms, stationery for schooling purposes, mid-day meals, and affordable education without any investment from families. ZP schools are known to be one of the best education services for people in poverty. Their teachers are well-trained and capable of working with children facing significant challenges. Basic education helps develop crucial life skills such as literacy, time management, communication, and decision-making. It also provides an avenue for the children to see a bigger picture in their lives in terms of their careers. Non-governmental organizations outside the ZP take the initiative to provide additional resources and services to the children in poor families. The organization is known as “Sparsh”, which means “touch” in English, and has established multiple initiatives to serve children in underprivileged families. With the vision of a “healthy and compassionate community”, the organization invests in programs like nutrition, education, medical care, vocational training, and infrastructure development. Among its key initiatives is the digitalization of Zilla Parishad (ZP) schools. Digitalization in rural schools means enhancing education methods through the introduction of technology, tablets, computers, online learning, and teaching in science and mathematics. The goal is to offer a means to obtain quality education through the use of creative teaching strategies [26]. However, providing services is of no use if the target population is not engaged. The organization observed a lack of motivation in children, leading to increased absenteeism and poor reading and writing skills. Digitalized innovative teaching methods have proven attractive among children and a way for them to access quality education. Discussing the outcome of this initiative, Sparsh [26] emphasized that since 2016, they have successfully digitalized more than 110 schools, helping more than 12,000 students and more than 425 teachers.

Education brings employment opportunities that could eliminate staying on the streets or elsewhere and finding a place to make a comfortable living. One way the most vulnerable can enter the education system is through

reservation benefits. The reservation scheme ensures representation of historically marginalized communities in education, employment, and politics. The reservation/quota provides a chance to underprivileged communities like the scheduled caste (SC), scheduled tribe (ST), and other backward castes (OBC) to get enrolled in government/public schools to receive primary and higher education. It is important to note that the main cause of reservations in India is the caste system. Historically, because of the high cost of schooling and higher education, which prevented especially those from underprivileged communities from affording it, on the other hand, white privilege was widespread in the country, which gave the upper-class power and freedom. As a result, the underprivileged communities faced discrimination across all areas of their lives, including education. The policy of education reservation/quota was created to provide justice and accessibility to these communities [27].

Social activists and non-governmental organizations can help children or families take advantage of the reservations. Organizations, businesses, and possibly community stakeholders can work together to acquire resources for people living below the poverty line and those who are homeless. Such efforts may not only address systemic barriers in the country but also help to reduce discrimination against this population.

### **Demolition of slums**

Has the Indian government shown progress in reducing homelessness or uplifting people in poverty? In some cases, government authorities have instead destroyed livelihoods, displacing the poor, and forcing people to leave the place where they once used to have a bed. One of the prime examples of such incidents was the G20 Summit hosted in the capital city of New Delhi in 2023. People living in slums faced nothing less than a traumatic event in their lives when bulldozers by the intergovernmental groups accompanied by law enforcement started demolishing shelters, small houses, and stores, and forcing people to vacate the area. It is certainly true that not all families had registered ownership of their homes, meaning an entry in the official governmental records and documents. The buyer guarantees that the transaction is accepted and enforced by law and establishes legal possession of the property by registering it. Protecting the buyer's rights and interests in the property requires taking this crucial step; however, there should have been an appropriate legal course of action that considered the future of the families living in this location. In fact, some of the stories of individuals and families from the region describe how local authorities took them to bus stations to remove them from their homes. Such incidents were very unfortunate and traumatic for the individuals and families affected. The “need” for a venue for the G20 summit was the reason given for this significant displacement of the poorest in society. Protest was the only way to advocate for the people suffering from this demolition. The entire globalization movement and groups opposing this displacement were highlighted [28]. Those who lost their homes sought shelter wherever they could, on streets, in temples, or on playgrounds, further increasing the numbers of the unhoused.

This disregard for people's efforts to make their existence livable is shocking. What is missing from this picture of slum demolition is recognition of people's energy and resilience in rebuilding their shelters against the destructive power of government. The devastation of slums makes people's desire to improve their lives invisible and easy to dismiss. This is why our next study focuses on a comparative analysis of how different countries approach the problem of the existence of slums.

### Lessons from the U.S.

Through his involvement in community services in India, Lanjewar explored multiple governmental facilities and programs designed to help individuals and families living below the poverty line. He experienced various dimensions of support provided by the Indian government towards basic needs, education, healthcare, and housing. Lanjewar noticed the holistic approach and community collaboration to reach the shared goals of the communities. Diversity is a major question for the Indian government, which participates in inclusive practices by implementing policies and advocacy that are beneficial to underserved groups like minorities. Lanjewar completed a master's degree in social work from one of the prestigious schools of social work in the United States and participated in community initiatives as well as clinical social work. His work with communities in the USA introduced him to some of the American governmental programs supporting individuals and families living in poverty and facing homelessness.

Social work practice with homeless veterans and others in the United States involves an introduction to multiple American government programs and policies [29]. One of them is the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher, a federal program that provides rental assistance to low-income families, people with disabilities, and the elderly. However, applicants face long waiting lists before obtaining rental assistance. During his practice, Lanjewar observed clear differences between the processes for veterans and those for others. The HUD VASH department at the Cleveland VA Medical Center does a commendable job of helping veterans find and maintain housing by providing intensive case management. As a designated special population, veterans benefit from resources and dedicated people to help them. In contrast, the process is very different for non-veterans. It is not easy for homeless individuals and families to reach out to community organizations and seek case management help to obtain housing. There are significant barriers, such as limited transportation, education, guidance, and untreated mental health issues; in addition, case managers are overwhelmed with caseloads, a lack of documentation, stereotypes and stigma, and other challenges.

Sometimes, the city housing authority itself becomes a barrier when treating individuals and families coming from different walks of life. During his practice at the VA, Lanjewar noticed that veterans receive the special attention that they deserve, with dedicated teams coordinating with the VA team to discuss access to services [30], housing status, process, needs, etc. But when Lanjewar worked with homeless populations in community organizations, he noticed completely opposite scenarios, in

which individuals had to wait weeks to get an appointment with representatives (mostly case managers) of the housing authority, faced long-standing waiting lists, received no confirmation of successful admission to the program for months and months, had difficulty finding housing, and lacked housing navigation guidance, among many more challenges. There are numerous factors contributing to each process and a great deal of variability in people's situations; this description simply comes from his experiences working directly with clients.

Homelessness is growing faster in the United States each year, affecting different demographics, individuals and families, immigrants and refugees. It remains a significant problem to solve, requiring considerable effort, resources, policies, civic engagement, and, most importantly, the involvement of the government as much as possible. People do not deserve to be homeless. Housing is a basic human right and a critical steppingstone to obtaining various resources to maintain well-being. We learned that discrimination on a systemic level is a significant problem. Populations are categorized by their social status, race, and the agencies that refer them; no matter the population, homeless individuals face a substantial gap in services. As discussed earlier, the treatment of veterans and others at housing agencies looks different in terms of priorities given, responsiveness, and availability of case workers. The general population is at a clear disadvantage. To combat systemic discrimination, authorities must ensure equal access to services, people/representatives in place to attend to homeless individuals, and families' requests and facilitate housing needs. Culturally competent services are especially impactful when working with diverse groups of people. Furthermore, working with homeless populations is heavily based on trust. Developing relationships with them and advocating for their housing rights could bring significant changes in their lives, while treating them unethically will not.

### Conclusion

Community social workers, activists, and NGOs frequently advocate for homeless people to acquire their rights which are getting housed and helping them build better lives without facing discrimination. Poverty and homelessness are also hot topics for politicians, often used to attract voters. They remember to include this population in their manifestos, but unfortunately, not everyone works for them, and they are just a source of gaining empathy from citizens by showing care for the homeless. Using unhoused people as a tool to be elected does increase the voting percentages, but unhoused people are left to suffer. They struggle to access the benefits that they need to survive and achieve a decent standard of living.

Homelessness in India does not occur in isolation. Families face generational poverty that impacts their mental and physical health, contributes to behavioral issues, medical conditions, and societal differences such as discrimination, racism, family problems, lack of education, and lack of support in the community. Individuals and families are generally religious and believe in God to be the last option to solve their problems. They stay wherever they get a place to sleep and are mostly found on the

streets or temple grounds. Further, migrant communities often settle in one place, build shelters with a plastic sheet roof, and try to make a living. Eventually, the number of people migrating to the same place increases because of the invitation to find a job by family members or relatives, and they make their living in the same place, leading to the formation of slums. The tradition of helping each other is deeply rooted in Indian families. As discussed earlier, this is one of the reasons why people in poverty may have a roof over their head but the registry of a raw house. A raw house refers to a dwelling that is incomplete; it may have walls but no roof and be covered with a plastic sheet, and it may lack a primary source of water, electricity, plumbing, sewage, a foundation, interior or exterior, and security. On the other hand, authorities could take the initiative to convert slums into structured housing blocks and invest in reformed housing societies, rather than resorting to demolition and leaving people with nowhere to go. Stable housing is a fundamental need that allows individuals to obtain other resources that are important for future development, such as healthcare, including mental health services, and education.

Overall, homelessness in India is a complex issue and needs a comprehensive approach from different types of stakeholders at various levels to eliminate or at least reduce homelessness to some degree. It is very important to modify and change the perception of citizens toward homelessness and start providing support.

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