The Effect of COVID 19 Pandemic and Lockdown on Homeless Persons

Edition 10, Praxis Voices From Margins series

With support from Indo-Global Social Service Society (IGSSS)

May 8, 2020

PANELISTS’ PROFILES

Panelist 1: Sonu P. Yadav works with IGSSS on issues of homelessness in five states. He has previously worked with various organizations on human rights issues, including child rights, rights of adolescents, girls, labour rights, advocacy and research.

Panelist 2: Jairam Kale belongs to the Pardhi community. He lives along with 35 families under a prominent bridge in Pune. He works as a head loader at construction sites, earning between Rs 200 and Rs 400 a day depending on the work. At other times, he sells toys that he purchases from Mumbai at a small margin. He lives with his six family members in constant fear of eviction.

Panelist 3: Gudiya is 27 years old and hails from Bakhtiarpur, Bihar. She has been working as domestic help for the past 15 years in Patna. She lives with her family in a slum which was demolished just at the beginning of the nationwide lockdown. She will be sharing about the effect of lockdown on her family.

Panelist 4: Sarasa has been living on the roadsides of Parry’s Corner, Chennai, for the past three generations since her parents came to city almost 75 years ago. She earns a living as a helper in tying flowers for sale and earns up to Rs.100 to Rs.200 per day. She lives with her family of 15, which includes 4 children and 6 grandchildren. All her children work as head-loaders and daily wagers and the lockdown has taken its toll in their survival.

Panelist 5: Nandlal, who is 50 years old, overcame the discrimination he faced because of his disability to work for others like him. Hailing from Devaria district of Uttar Pradesh, he moved to Delhi to escape the taunts by family members and neighbours. He started living on the footpath near India Gate. He has worked with several NGOs for the rights of homeless persons, especially becoming a voice for those among them who have a disability.

Panelist 6: Neelavathy lives near Broadway area of Chennai. She works as a domestic help in the apartments nearby. She lives with her husband, who drives a van, and two adolescent children, one of whom will appear for his Class X examinations next year. Ever since the lockdown was imposed, she has not been able to go to work and has not been.

Panelist 7: Ramachandra Reddy hails from Kurnool. He has been working in a catering company (in 12-hour shifts) for the past year in Guntur and earns Rs. 300 / service. Earlier, he was working a helper in a construction site for Rs.350 / day (12-hour shifts). He has a family of 8 members who are completely dependent on his income. He has been unable to send money to his family since the lockdown. He was living in a rented house and was unable to pay his rents since the lockdown.
Panelist 8: Tarique Mohammad Quereshi is an assistant professor at Tata Institute of Social Sciences. He has specialisation in criminology and correctional Behaviour. He also heads the “Koshish Project” by Tata Institute of Social Sciences. He has also been featured in under 30 achievers in Forbes India magazine.

Panelist 9: John Peter Nelson is the executive director of IGSSS. He has more than 30 years of experience in the social sector. He was earlier with CARITAS India.

Panelist 10: Indu Prakash Singh is a human rights defender and member, of the advisory panel of Delhi govt for food relief, and also a member of the State Level Shelter Monitoring Committee (SLSMC) Delhi and the facilitator of the CityMakers Mission International.

WELCOME NOTE

Tom Thomas, Praxis: Praxis particularly focuses on methods and ways of bringing in marginalized voices and engages in a dialogue with academicians, activists, policy makers, journalists, development workers or whoever is concerned with the ongoing scenario. COVID-19 Voices from Margins series is one such initiative to bring in the voices of those people pushed at the margins and hear from them what the reality is. While over the past 9 webinars, we have heard from inter-state migrant workers, garment and entertainment sector workers, DNTs, students with special needs and so on, we realized that the government is pretty much clueless and unconcerned how to deal with the situation of marginalized communities. Such a situation reminds of the wandering roosters calling an early day at midnight hours. Today’s webinar is a conversation with the homeless community, needless to say they are at the bottom of the marginalization facing it at multiple levels. Right to life and shelter who need shelter is still not managed. Today’s webinar is a collaboration between Praxis and Indo Global Social Service Society (IGSSS) bringing on board many homeless people from across the country. We also have people who are working with the homeless community directly or indirectly on welfare measures and advocating their cause at state as well as national levels.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Panelist 1: Sonu P. Yadav- The major problem of homeless population is shelter and there are multiple levels of discrimination. We at IGSSS collected government notifications from 29 states in India to see whether they are talking about homeless people or not. The major indicators are food, sanitation, social security and cash transfer which are considered as basic minimum needs of people. It has been found that 16 states do not have any mention about homeless population. State like Bihar mentions ‘shelterless’ which brings in another debate between ‘homeless’ and ‘shelterless’. According to the study conducted by IGSSS last year in 15 cities across 5 states, homeless population largely belongs to four categories- SC 36%, ST 23%, OBC 21% followed by the general caste. There have been few cases where caste plays major role in creating double layers of discrimination within this marginalized section of the society. Homeless people staying at hilltop in Vijaywada are not allowed to come down to collect ration. The livelihood has been completely destroyed; they are prone to diseases because of the place they stay and food they eat. According to the study, most homeless people are engaged in construction sector followed by beggary. Beggars in Mumbai are beaten up by the police because of sitting on street. With respect to government interventions, precisely good practices, Andhra Pradesh is doing better with providing food, soap and mask. They converted buildings as shelters. But the problem is that not only homeless people are accessing shelter; people who were evacuated from rented places are coming in to these shelters making the places crowded. There are so many discussions around distribution of ration but the issue is people who do not have ration cards are unable to access the same. Delhi and Jharkhand are better placed in this regard, though people in Jharkhand are being beaten up by the police while approaching the food distribution centres. It has been found in the study that only 37% people have ration cards 27.7% have Jan Dhan (J DY) account. In Patna, only 5 among 20 people have received money
in their Jan Dhan account. Homeless people are seen as ‘trash’ in the city and this pandemic has further worsened the situation.

Panelist 2: Jairam Kale- We knew that the lockdown will extend. The major challenge is arranging food. We have to follow the lockdown norms and help in fighting the virus. We are labours living on street and survive on daily wage. Somehow, we managed to access the ration with the help of school authority. After 15 days, police came and asked us to leave the place; we told them how will we manage? The police provided us rice and pulses, but everything has finished. We have children at home and there’s nothing to feed them. We are thankful to the people who have helped us. Earlier we were facing challenges due to rain. We are currently living under a bridge near an area called gymkhana.

Panelist 3: Gudiya- I am Gudiya from TV tower. We are facing lot of difficulties. Nobody is calling us for work. My house was demolished in March. I live in an open space. I don't feel safe. People stare at us. Owners have asked us not to come for work. They said that we might bring infection as we come from outside. People in other areas have been receiving relief support but no one has reached to us.

Panelist 4: Sarasa- I am Sarasa living in Parry’s corner at roadside. My family and the community here have been struggling to sell flowers and go for cooli work. My children are going for cooli work but currently, due to the lockdown none of us are able to work. The main struggle for us is getting food as there is no other source of income. There is no shelter; we stay at road sides of Parry’s Corner during hot climate and in rains. The situation has worsened after the outbreak of corona. Many people have borrowed money to get dry ration but the quality of products hasn’t been good, hence they were unable to use it. I have ration card and got 1 kg pulses, 1 kg sugar and 1 litre of oil. None of the products were given free but bought with nominal amount. Even the products that I received are not enough to feed my whole family.

Panelist 5: Nandlal- I am Nandlal, a disabled person. I have worked in Mother NGO, now working with Sunil ji (Centre for Development). I am from Deoria, Uttar Pradesh. I came to Delhi long back. I am facing lot of problems with respect to food; it’s also difficult to stay in a small space. Many people were dependent on the religious places for their survival. After these places have been shut down, they are now abandoned. People who used to visit these places used to help them with food. Those who had the shelters in religious places have nothing, not even utensils to cook. Due to fear of police, people are running away. Some came back from Gujarat by foot. The government should have given at least a week long time for announcing the lockdown. The sudden lockdown has created lot of issues. The centers are so crowded that people are unable to get in there. There should have been a proper planning before announcing the lockdown. If the lockdown would have been planned in a better way, these issues would have not come.

Panelist 6: Neelavathy- I am Neela living near Broadway area in Chennai, Tamilnadu. We live at the roadside. Men work as cooli and women work as domestic help. We have lost our jobs due to lockdown, hence unable to manage food. Police refrain us from accessing public toilets; we have to get into argument to use the toilets. Either its elderly people or children, the access is denied. It’s even more challenging for menstruating women. At times, we are left with no choice but open defecation. We are receiving same quantity ration we normally used to get. There has been no special provision or effort for this pandemic situation. We didn’t get salary and couldn’t even ask them too. They offer to give Rs.100 or 200, how can it be sufficient? Police ask us to stay inside which is hard to manage in summer days.

Panelist 7: Ramachandra Reddy- I hail from Beancherla Mandal of Kurnool district. I have a family of 7 members including my wife, mother and 3 children (1 deceased) and their partners who are completely dependent on my income. My son had expired 5 years ago and I am taking care of my daughter in law. I was working as a cooli (daily wager), the wage did not increase. My wife also works as a cooli. She is a
diabetic patient and my mother is a heart patient. During this time, it is difficult to get medicines for my mother (costs more than Rs. 500 per month). They will be able to get medication for her only if I send money. My father had lung cancer and for that I took multiple loans for treatment. A year ago I joined the catering work in Guntur. This is not a regular work. I get paid Rs.300 per service and send money to my family once a month. Since lockdown started in March, I am staying in a shelter home in Guntur. They are also providing food. But I am currently unable to pay the house rent of Rs.1000 per month for my family in Kurnool. I am unsure about getting work after lockdown gets over. Neither my family has work there back in hometown. I also don't think that I can go back home.

Panelist 8: Tarique Mohammad Quereshi- There are lot of people in the cities, mainly elderly and disabled who have been abandoned by people. They mostly live on traffic signals. I will talk about those people who are abandoned. They are people at traffic signals and living on pavement. They need to avail the relief support. There are many shopkeepers who have spread support to these people with food and the security guards provide them water. Homeless people are hidden, but there are sets of people within the homeless community, who are pushed at extreme margins. When police comes and beats them, they don't even understand why police is behaving in such a way. Even getting beaten, they roam around on streets. They need to be registered somewhere to access support. Their survival depends on the support of common people. They are not in a condition to understand the instructions. They will not be able to take the food even if it is available in front of them. Relief is being provided to people but this section has been left out. People who cannot go anywhere to receive any kind of relief, what will happen to them, especially those with mental ailments? They are much dependent on people they are familiar with. We need to understand the gap, even within the homeless population. Looking at their condition, many people would not entertain them. These people at the traffic signals might have been removed by now. The reach of NGOs is also very limited to this section of society.

Panelist 9: John Peter Nelson- Fellow citizens need to have the sensitivity to respect each other. If I am getting paid working from home or without even working- we similarly should show respect to those like maids/ domestic help who help us in managing the household chores. It’s not only the identity of home, but they should be addressed as city makers. Though there have been slight improvements in the legislations and Supreme Court regulations for the welfare of homeless community, the Government still needs to effectively work towards safeguarding the needs of the homeless people. Instead of addressing them as ‘trash’, Government should credit them as ‘citymakers’ and ensure them with stay facility, guaranteed income support, minimum salary and above all protect human values and dignity. Many organizations in our networks are helping the homeless people with ration, but this should not be restricted to COVID scenario but even beyond that for policy advocacy. The pandemic has completely exposed feudalistic culture of the country, caste-class divide is getting manifested, exclusions and reinforcement of marginalization are visible today. Sensitivity, concern and respect towards fellow citizens have to be reaffirmed to stand in solidarity with these citymakers.

Panelist 10: Indu Prakash Singh- To address this acute health emergency of untold proportions while all systems of our country have collapsed, it is important for the Government to understand the gaps and work together with the civil society actors in this disaster moments. Things are better handled in Delhi because some of us have managed to counsel the government to manage the situation. Bureaucrats including Chief Secretary of Delhi are very supportive and we got the right orders in terms of distribution of food and shelter. Anyone whose slum area has been shut down can go to the shelters and have food there. Cooked food supplies have been arranged in MCD schools. Today at 1910 locations, cooked food has been served. Later ration and other supplied have come in. The way these people are beaten left and blue by police is criminal and brutal. Poor people are homeless and mass in this nation. People who are at shelter homes are better off. Migrants who are also citymakers have been left with no choice but walk down by foot. Few state governments like Kerala and Delhi have done well. Civil society organizations
have come forward in big support. Lots of people, organizations and civil society actors have come together through Whatsapp network, joined hands and extended their support to people irrespective of their working domains. Union government who once berated civil society also realized the importance of bringing the civil society together, otherwise they would have never been able to do things they have done. Issues related to destitution or mental health need to be catered separately even after lockdown gets over. As the pandemic has brought in the livelihood of people to a pause, economy has gone into a toss- the Government should strategize a livelihood plan for the informal sector post the lockdown to regain from the economic downturn. Meanwhile, all state governments should have a long term provision of free food for the homeless people till the economic activities start functioning on a regular pace. PM-Cares fund needs to be opened for people. Supreme Court is completely missing from the scene while they could have given some fantastic orders but they have kept them out. It’s a time of complete violation of human rights because people are being beaten up by police even when they are moving out to access food. Poverty has reached 80% of the population including the middle class. It’s a mess that we have created and it’s the time for lessons to be learnt. Government needs to run trains and help people reach home. They understand the importance of these people, but have no clue how to treat them when it’s worse for them. While the system, social security and legislations collapsed, it’s a dire need of state and its people to work out post-COVID plans to make cities just and inclusive.

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

Concept of homelessness

Q. Why is it that the government circular doesn't mention 'homeless' officially? Is it because of 'image' reasons?

A. (Response from Sonu) – Homelessness is not about having home, rather related to respect and dignity. Till now the government hasn't understood the concept of homelessness. It understands the concept of shelter but not right to housing. When we mention ‘shelter’, the authorities understand the need of providing shelter. Lack of advocacy from civil society on homelessness is also a reason of our failure because it is not as popular as education, livelihood or health.

(Response from Tarique) – There have been few government circulations which clearly mention the word homeless and there are few which are specific for homeless population. One is from Ministry of Home Affairs and the other from Ministry of Social Justice. Circular mentions to use the state disaster relief fund to feed the homeless people. We are also in process of collecting data for assessing the needs of people, especially pregnant women and lactating mothers whether they are receiving support from ASHA workers. We connected to 300 families across the country- while providing them relief, we are also collecting data for analysis.

Awareness about disease and infection

Q. Do people like Gudiya understand what is meant by the 'bimari' of 'corona virus'? Do the public health authorities spend any time and effort of spreading the precautionary measures to the marginalized?

A. (Response from Jairam) – The police people came and asked us to share if there is anyone who is infected with virus. We told them to come and check. The police tell us not to go out and wear mask on face. I have no idea how long I will have to sit idle. I believe the virus will come and go. The religious places should not have been closed down. Such places would have provided shelter to many people. No idea how long this will go on. All the workers are sitting idle.
(Response from Nandlal) – Corona virus has spread from China. It is now everywhere in the world. It was initially in other countries like France and Italy but today it is everywhere. I came to know about it from circulars of various departments. WHO already conveyed the message on this in the month of December.

Field research amid COVID pandemic

Q. How do you do the field research in this environment of mobility severely restricted? Don’t the government authorities prevent you from doing the field research because of fear of publicity/bad press?

A. SDM of South Delhi approached us (Praxis) to conduct a quick research study with about 60 people living in shelter home. The report is well-timed and the findings will be used for advocating mental health and other related issues.

Q. Were there any instances of communal prejudices that you have come across, either from providers of services or police or from among themselves?

A. The responses from the respondents pointed to the bias from the police side. There were instances shared where police picked them up as they were found to be on street but no direct reference was made to the communal prejudices. Also, this also was not part of the direct objectives of the study. Idea was to look at their plan ahead.

Findings of the study done by Praxis:

Sample: 66 respondents (information about 77 residents, 3 female, 63 male, 7 people 60 and above age group, average age 38 years)

Scenarios identified among the sample: Old age people or others living on street and not earning (no other support); Children/ women separated from families; People who need mental health/ institutional support before going back or reunified; People who have house or relatives in Delhi and can go; People who lived on street and earned and need to go back to their native place; People who lived on street and earned, no place to earn anymore or stay, do not want to go back

What came out through interactions?: Only 20 (30%) had identity proof, of which only 11 (17%) had it with them in shelter; Only 12 (18%) respondents provided mobile number (many not active as no many to recharge or phone battery is discharged; At least 16 (24%) respondents appeared to be requiring counseling support; At least 18 (27%) people had no source of earning before lockdown or could not explain what they used to do; Majority- 41(62%) were living on street, 13 were in temporary structure on street, stayed at worksite- 6, own house/rented place- 4, in shelter or in transit-2; Of the 66, around 47 provided details of daily earnings- average daily wage was Rs 360. None of them had a regular job, worked in range of 12-15 days and struggled for job through connections with contractors or as daily wage labourers.

Residents were involved in 17 different trades- most being working in hotel, marriages and parties (23), Painter/ carpenter (3), selling food/toys on street (5) and rest mostly daily wage earners in beldari, construction, shops etc