

Poverty and the Right to Food and Nutrition: A Study of the Beggars

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ABSTRACT:

The study is based on the research problem of the quality of food, water and nutrition consumed as per their daily dietary routine by beggars. India's Punjab state has been selected as the universe of the Study. On the bases of empirical observations collected through quantitative as well as qualitative research methods, the study presents the findings that beggars do not have any choice of food. Moreover, food for them is not a diet, but merely a means to satisfy their hunger howsoever. Therefore, there is lack of nutrition as well as hygiene in the food available to beggars. Further, most of the beggars do not have any choice but to drink contaminated water.

Keywords: Food Safety, Hygiene, Nutritional Food, Contaminated Water, Diseases.

INTRODUCTION:

All people deserve a dignified life. Exploitation, violence and destitution are the evils and each individual always wish to save their families from these evils. All humans need some basic necessities which are prerequisite for their survival, existence and development. Moreover, everyone has some basic rights regarding equality, life and liberty which the individual expects from society and state to acknowledge. However, the tragic reality of human civilisation is that in every society, there are certain sections that are deprived of the access to these basic necessities. But in this global world one section of individuals empty their basic necessities. The individuals and communities experiencing poverty, deprivation and exclusion always suffer due to the unavailability of basic rights. One of the most vulnerable sections of such kind is the community of beggars. Beggary has been recognised as the most shameful curse but the last resort to arrange the minimal resources required being alive. There is a universally acclaimed perception that people indulge into begging by compulsion and not by choice. Therefore, begging is generally perceived as the outcome of deprivation, extreme poverty, prolonged disease, unemployment, physical disability etc.

CONCEPTUALISING BEGGARY:

Conceptually, begging is not an explicit and irrespective of the regional distinctions, it carries ambiguity and subjectivity. In the most general terms, beggary is understood as an activity in which one person (beggar) requests to another person for any favour, in form of alms including money, material commodities, food items and clothes etc. As per the socio-cultural tradition of Hindu community, begging is recognised as a socially approved pattern of charity (Dhruvasan 1963). Although, it started as a gesture of charity, in the modern era of materialism beggary has very much developed into an institutionalised professional activity. Beggary as an activity can be understood as an inter-relationship between two parties, where one party represents miserability, deprivation and/or helplessness and expects from the other resourceful party to offer, grant or provide any monetary or materialist benefit on the grounds of humanitarianism. As an institution, beggary can be perceived as a socio-culturally negated, legally prohibited unorganised profession. A person who indulges into begging expresses his/her difficulty and attempt to gain sympathy from the resourceful persons with an expectation of money or material commodity. Begging is also defined as an activity of requesting people on the road or in the street to ask for help on the bases of mercy in the form of basic commodities and money (Menka 2012). Basically, Beggary is a voluntary relationship between two parties. It cannot be called as fraud. It is not an activity of deceiving someone with an intention of grabbing money.

Bombay Prevention of Begging Act (BPBA) 1959 defines a beggar as anyone “having soliciting or receiving alms in a public place, whether or not under any pretence of singing, dancing, fortune-telling, performing or offering any article for sale.”¹

Encyclopaedia of Social work of India defines that a beggar means any person of European extraction found asking for alms when he has sufficient means of subsistence or asking for alms in a threatening or insolent manner or continuing to ask for alms of any persons, after he has been required to desist. According to the Census of India, beggars are vagrants, prostitutes and person having unidentified source of income and those with unspecified source of subsistence and not engaged in any economically productive work during reference period called beggars (The Encyclopaedia of Social Work 1968). According to the Oxford Dictionary (Sixth edition, 2001), begging means to ask for money, food, garments etc. as a gift or as charity. This implies that begging is not peculiar to individuals, but also organisations or countries.

RIGHT TO FOOD AND NUTRITION:

Ensuring food safety and nutrition has been a need for mankind since ancient times (Arpaia 2017). While investigating the historical records, it appears explicitly that in the ancient Greek and Roman empires, right to food was duly acknowledged and there was an independent ministry to organise the demand, supply and quality of food items (Rees and Watson 2000). The Greek city state of Rome had specifically formulated the laws for

¹ Bombay Prevention of Begging Act 1959.

ensuring the food safety. During the post-Greek era as well, majority of European states had implemented laws with regard to fair distribution of food items, food safety and balanced food. As per the historical records, during the 13th century, European states had realised a formal legal acknowledgement to the standards of the food quality. There were formal rules and regulations determining the safety standards of various food items. Further, the 14th century proved to be the beginning of a revolution in the field of the standards of food safety and quality as there was development of scientific technologies for testing the quality of food items (Redman 2007). These technological inventions further provided guidelines to the industry of the manufacturing, processing and delivering food items.

The new inventions and discoveries in the field of food quality and standards compelled the British legislature to pass the Health Act in 1848 (Fee & Brown 2005). There was provision of an independent body, a General Board of Health. The primary task of that board was to keep under its control and supervision the local boards. The duty of these local boards was to continuously check the quality of food items and water. This provision largely controlled that spread of pandemic and mass diseases. The poor and destitute people living in the tribal and distinct areas were benefitted from this regulation (Phillips & French 1998). The end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century witnessed the states moving towards the establishment of codified legal systems. During this period, majority number of states, especially the western states started making provisions of incorporating criminal sanctions, including monetary sanctions as well as punishments to those found guilty for involvement in the dangerous practices of adulteration of food. After the end of the World War II, the scientific research in the field of food safety and food quality. Due to the impact of these advanced scientific innovations, there was a very positive change in the process of the production, processing and distribution of food items. The organisation of the United Nations put the attention of international fraternity towards the promotion and protection of human rights as primary concern (Burci & Vignes 2004). The United Nations, while setting the international framework of human rights in the international law largely expressed its explicit focus on the right to food, food safety and quality of food. The establishment of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) further proved as remarkable steps in the recognition of the right to food, food safety and nutritional food as human rights (FAO 1946). The first meeting of the joint expert committee of WHO and FAO took place from 24 to 28 October, 1949 at Geneva. The Joint Expert Committee passed a number of guidelines. It recommended that all states should adopt similar patterns, standards, protocols and processes while making rules with regard to food safety. It further focussed that the conflicts and ambiguities with regard to food standards should be eradicated. The committee further recommended that the regulations of food safety standards should be based on the most advanced scientific inventions and discoveries which are accepted worldwide and the states should be flexible, experimental and enthusiastic in improving the food safety standards on the bases of scientific experimentations (WHO 1949).

The process of international trade, economic growth and industrialisation further accelerated during the period of 1960s and 970s. As a result, the inter-state as well as intra-state trade of food items also increased very rapidly. It further reached to new heights with the advent of GATT, EEC and other international agreement with regard to international trade. As the trade of food items became one of the most demanding commodities of trade, the issues of food quality, food safety and food nutrition became the topics of political discourse worldwide (Echols 2008). In this scenario, the relevance of the international agencies supervising the food standards at international level increased. Noticeably, a joint meeting of the experts of FAO, WHO and Committee of Government Experts was held in 1958. Further, the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) was formed as an international agency to inspect the international food standards. In the May of 1963, the 16th World Health Assembly was called which approved the organisation of a joint FAO/WHO Standards Programme which the CAC (Randell 1995). The objective was to further strengthen the international standards of food safety and quality.

Right to food, including food safety and nutrient food has been explicitly and comprehensively recognised in the international law. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights emphasises that ‘every human has the right to a decent standard of living, compatible to the health and wellbeing of the individual, his family, including the right to food....’ The Right to food is further recognised in the Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Moreover, Article 11 of the FAO also addresses to the issues of hunger and starvation. Furthermore, the right to adequate and quality food is formally mentioned in the Articles 24(2)(c) and 27(3) of the International Instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women, right to food is recognised under Article 12(2). Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, under Articles 25(f) and 28(1) acknowledges to the right to adequate food.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY:

The city of Amritsar of India’s Punjab state has been selected for the purpose of conducting an empirical survey. Amritsar was selected due to its religious character and highest tourist footfall as these two factors attract beggars. Unfortunately, the concerned governmental authorities have not maintained and preserved any data about the population of the beggars. Therefore, it was planned to carry out a precise study by choosing a purposeful sample size to arrive at conclusive results. While conducting a pilot survey the city, places with most dense and vibrant presence of beggars were identified. Total 120 beggars including males and females were selected for the purpose of survey. The beggars begging at the outer premises of the Golden Temple and Jallianwala Bagh premises, Gurudwara Shaheedan Sahib, Durgiana Mandir, Shivala Mandir, Lawrence Road were consulted.

Applying the appropriate methodology and obtaining the most precise results was the most challenging part of the study. Primarily, the findings of the study are based on the close-

ended questionnaire. In addition to this, unscheduled interviews of the selected beggars, focused group discussions with the selected beggars as well as the shopkeepers and vendors were also utilized accordingly. Though, the study is primarily quantitative as per its research methodology, it is equally qualitative and observational in nature. The researcher, after selecting the places for the field study, identified the selected beggars. Maximum one or two beggars at a time were possible to be observed thoroughly. Afterwards, the timings of arrival at the places of begging and the departures from those places of the selected beggars were noted. Then, the researcher started reaching at the spots before the arrival of the selected beggars, kept on observing them from quite manageable but significant distances. All relevant queries were appropriately noted down, which were adequately completed at every night.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY:

Number of Meals per Day:

As the study primarily relates to the quantity and quality of food available to the beggars, the foremost question asked from the beggars was that how many meals they took every day. Noticeably, there was no beggar who took four meals a day. 31.7 per cent revealed they had been consuming three meals while 67.5 per cent reported as taking two meals per day. There were less than 01 per cent (1 out of 120) beggars who allegedly had been found as taking only one meal a day.

Table 1. Number of Meals per day

Number of Meals	Number of respondents	Percentage
Four	0	0
Three	38	31.7
Two	81	67.5
One	01	0.8

The statistical data divulges that beggars in Punjab are largely able to get two or more than two meals per day. It indicates that the beggars, facing poverty and deprivation, have at least minimal resources to arrange the meals of two to three times a day. Although, it is worrying that more than two-third of the beggars are able to get only two meals per day. As per the prescribed international guidelines by the World Health Organisation (WHO), an adult should consume at least three meals per day. Nevertheless, if these international per day meal standards are ignored, it is quite satisfying that approximately 98 per cent beggars are able to arrange two meals for them every day.

Food Cooked at Home or Elsewhere:

After obtaining the information about the number of meals consumed by the selected beggars per day, it was further asked from them whether they cooked their food at homes or made it available from anywhere else. In response, 60 per cent of the beggars confirmed that they had been cooking their food at home every day. However, rest of the 40 per cent revealed that they had been availing food from other sources.

Table 2. Food Cooked at Home or Elsewhere

Responses	Number of respondents	Percentage
Yes	72	60
No	48	40

The findings disclose that although, majority number of beggars had been found as consuming their home-made food, there were ample numbers of beggars who had not been cooking food, rather were dependant on other sources for their food. As per the empirical observations, majority numbers of beggars have their own dwelling, in form of small houses (in majority cases, one-room house) or the hutments. Therefore, majority number of beggars is able to cook food at their homes due to the availability of space and minimum resources required for cooking food. A noticeable number of beggars are found as homeless who live on the footpaths or at the premises outside the religious shrines or the governmental buildings. Largely, these beggars do not have any space and availability of the minimal resources required to cook food every day. Therefore, these beggars are dependent on other sources for satisfying their food related needs.

Sources of Food (those who do not Cook at Home):

Those beggars, who were found as not cooking food at homes, due to their homelessness, or lack of the basic resources required to cook food, they were further asked that where did they get their food from every day. In response to the query, 87.5 per cent told that they were dependent on the community-food (*Langer* in Punjabi language) being offered at the religious shrines or arranged by the philanthropic persons at random places. There were 4.1 per cent who revealed that they consumed food while begging it from the eateries including vendors or smaller restaurants (*Dhabas* in Punjab and Hindi languages). Noticeably, 8.4 per cent were found as buying the daily meals from eateries while paying in cash.

Table 3. Sources of Food (in case not cooked at home)

Source of food	Number of respondents	Percentage
Religious Shrine or Philanthropic (Langar)	42	87.5
Begging from the Hotels / Eateries / Vendors	2	4.1

/ Dhabas		
Buying the Food from the Hotels / Eateries / Vendors / Dhabas	4	8.4

It was corroborated in the table 2 of the study that 40 per cent beggars so not cook their food at their homes, the analysis of the table 2 further explains the causes that why do a noticeable number of beggars not get home-made food. The table 3 explicates that beggars largely depend on the food received as alms for charity. The region of Punjab, being the homeland of Sikhism, expresses the distinguishable trends of philanthropic community kitchens and serving of community food to all, especially the poor free of cost. The beggars, begging at the pre-planned and selected places, preferably identify the religious shrines, preferably Sikh *Gurdwaras* (Sikh place of worship) near to the area of their activity and visit there to satisfy their food-related appetite. There are very meagre number of beggars who reportedly beg the food from the eateries in or around their place of activity. Interestingly, there are quite significant number of beggars who buy their food while paying in cash. These trends of buying food corroborate that beggary has been more or less perceived as a formal professional activity by a significant number of beggars who prefer to purchase their food through income earned by them while begging.

Source of Drinking Water:

After obtaining the information from beggars about their per day meals, it was considered as equally significant to get the information about the source/s of water consumed by beggars every day. As per the general perception acquired through the review of literature, beggars generally do not have access to safe and hygienic drinkable water. As per the statistical data framed through related query, approximately 81 per cent beggars revealed that had been drinking water from public tabs while remaining around 19 per cent confirmed as using public tanks for drinking water.

Table 4. Source of Water

Source of water	Number of respondents	Percentage
Public Taps	97	80.83
Public Tanks	23	19.17

The data conforms that beggars are largely dependent on public tabs for drinking water. Although, a significant number has preference, or access to public tanks for drinking water. Generally, the public tabs are considered as source of clean drinking water. Therefore, the study corroborates that largely, the beggars have access to clean drinking water. Nevertheless, same statement cannot be framed for beggars who mostly drink water from the public tanks. The reason is that public tanks, established for the purpose of providing free and easy access to people at the public places, are not cleaned periodically. Hence, there are ample chances that unclean and contaminated water is preserved in these public tanks. The

consumption of contaminated water results into the transmission of diseases such as cholera, diarrhoea, dysentery, hepatitis A, typhoid and polio etc.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

The study corroborates a number of findings. Largely, beggars are getting the minimum number of meals in sufficient number which are prescribed as per the international food standards. Although, beggars are able to consume sufficient number of meals per day, there is lack of sufficient quantity of food. The reason is that most of the beggars have the community food served by the philanthropic or religious institutions or individuals as primary of source of water. There are ample chances that beggars do not generally get food in sufficient amount to satisfy the total food needs of their bodies. Moreover, the beggars who get food from the philanthropic channels have comparatively more chances of getting good quality food in comparison to those who buy their food from the food vendors. It is a generally perceived fact that the food offered by the vendors lacks the quality and prescribed standards of cooking and serving. Further, beggars do not have any choice of nutritional food. Their primary priority is to satisfy their hunger and moreover, the beggars getting food as alms cannot even imagine of nutritional food. The study further explicates that majority number of beggars drink water from the public tanks. The water preserved in the public tanks is generally contaminated and stingy. Hence, beggars are always vulnerable to the diseases level, stomach, intestine and kidneys. The Right to Food Security Act, 2013, implemented in India since more than ten years, has failed to provide any benefit to beggars who do not have any choice but to satisfy the hunger of their own and their families while begging food from the philanthropic agents serving community food.

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