



Urban homeless shelters in India: Miseries untold and promises unmet[☆]



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ABSTRACT

An urban shelter is designed to offer refuge to homeless people and access to basic services like drinking water, sanitation and safety. This research paper aims to critically appraise condition of such shelters, vis-à-vis common services mandated to be provided at each shelter by the Supreme Court of India. A survey of shelters was conducted in four cities of Uttar Pradesh (viz., Allahabad, Varanasi, Lucknow and Agra) spanning a sample of 426 shelter-inmates. Analysis has been done in two stages: evaluation of common services on the basis of their significance as perceived by inhabitants, and assessment of significant services to check their availability and functionality. Factor analysis has clubbed nineteen such services under five factors (named as: entitlement to schemes, hygiene & recreation, cooking support system, ambience, and drinking water & conservancy). Findings reveal large scale unavailability of services and bring to light the appalling condition of shelters in the cities surveyed. This study may be useful in framing a focused policy for providing shelters to homeless people in urban areas by identifying services considered significant by inmates and ensuring availability of such services.

1. Introduction

Homelessness has been a perennial problem in India. Considered to be one of the by-products of rapid urbanization, homelessness is a growing urban issue that the poorest urban dwellers are vulnerable to experiencing (Ballal, 2011). Shortage of urban housing units in India, as recorded in 1991 Census, stood at 5.1 million, which grew to 7.1 million units by 2001 (Tewari, Raghupathi, & Husain Ansari, 2007). Though the number has fallen to 1.77 million as per the latest Census of 2011, an average of five generations of homelessness is estimated for a family of four members (Census, 2011).

The actual legal definition of ‘homeless’ and depiction of the condition of homelessness vary across nations. Further, such definitions and typologies of homeless people as prevalent in Western countries are mostly inappropriate for developing countries, and even a single definition of homelessness is not likely to be fit for all developing nations (Speak & Tipple, 2003). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25, Paragraph 1) defines homelessness as “the condition of people without a regular dwelling because they are unable to acquire, maintain regular, safe, and adequate housing, or lack fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence”.

Following Amore (2013, p. 228), we project homelessness in this study as “living in severely inadequate housing due to a lack of access to minimally adequate housing”. Busch-Geertsema et al. (2016 p. 126)

categorize homeless people as those who are “living in temporary or crisis accommodation”, i.e., “staying in night shelters (where occupants have to renegotiate their accommodation nightly)”. For the purpose of this paper we have considered the definition of homeless people by the Census of India (2011), describing them as “the persons who are not living in Census houses”, with possible places of habitat including pavements, roadsides, at railway platforms, under staircases, inside drainage pipes, at temple-mandaps, or in the open. Homeless population in India is largely heterogeneous, considering the dimensions of age, gender, family size, means of earning livelihood, place of origin and reasons for homelessness (The Hindu, 12 September 2006). Those who fail to afford a slum suffer from continued homelessness, living in precarious conditions (Housing and Land Rights Network-India, 2012), seeking refuge in make-shift structures made of cardboard, tin, wood and plastic, representing a condition of scant infrastructure and severe environmental pressure (Johnston, 2013).

As per the Supreme Court of India (2010), homeless people comprise single men and women, women with children, elderly people and persons with special needs, and are looked down upon as “vaguely dangerous and intractably on the wrong side of the law” (Mander, 2008, p. 4). They are generally stereotyped as lazy and antisocial and seen as an obstacle to the development of a city (Mander & Jacob, 2010). It is because of the portrayal of homeless people as unemployed, criminals and beggars, observe Speak and Tipple (2006) that

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interventions addressing the issue of homelessness in developing nations fail to be helpful. In reality this segment of urban population is “suffering from some of the severest forms of human rights violations” (Prasad, 2011, p. 1), deprived not only of the basic need of shelter, but also of related aspects such as sanitation, hygiene, health and education, leading to ill health (Prasad, 2012) and a denial to a dignified life.

In the past few decades, government in India has been attempting to address the issue of homelessness by way of policies that assist the delivery of affordable housing for Economically Weaker Sections and provide shelters to homeless people in urban areas. The term ‘shelter’ refers to a facility of living, equipped with the basic services essential for a dignified life. According to *Commissioners of the Supreme Court (2014, pp. xi-xii)*, “an urban homeless shelter may be understood as a safe, decent, and secure covered space, which offers to urban homeless persons who wish to access it, protection from the elements, space to rest and store their belongings, access to drinking and bathing water, sanitation and allied facilities, and security and safety”. Location of these shelters is considered to be critical, and must ideally be in proximity of locations where homeless people commonly live, including public places like bus terminals, railway stations, marketplaces and wholesale markets (or *mandis*).

The Supreme Court of India (hereafter also referred to as Supreme Court) has mandated that for cities with population exceeding 5 lakhs and covered under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), a large scale scheme for modernization of cities launched in 2005, following nineteen basic services (refer to [Table 1](#)) must be provided at shelters (*Commissioners of the Supreme Court of India, 2012*): potable drinking water and sanitation (named as water arrangements in [Table 1](#)); toilets; area for bathing and washing clothes with running water; cooling, heating and ventilation; standard lighting (including emergency lights); adequate fire safety measures; common recreation space for inmates having reading space, television, etc. (named as recreation space in [Table 1](#)); first aid; pest and mosquito control; bedding (including blankets, mattresses and sheets); open space; kitchen or space for cooking; equipment needed for cooking (e.g., cooking gas); utensils required for cooking; childcare facilities; psycho-social counselling; referral and transportation at times of medical emergency (named as referral and transport in [Table 1](#)); facilitation for convergence with other services; and linkages with entitlement to schemes related to social security, healthcare and food.

The purpose behind creation of homeless shelters is to provide a temporary home to homeless people in urban areas, equipped with mandatory services. Hence it has been considered worthwhile in this research paper to gauge the condition of such shelters in terms of availability of mandatory services and their importance. Availability of such services has been assessed on the basis of observation of the

Table 1
List of Mandatory Services at Shelters.

Sr. no.	Services	Sr. no.	Services
1	Water arrangements	11	Open space
2	Toilets	12	Kitchen/cooking space
3	Area for bathing and washing clothes with running water	13	Equipment needed for cooking
4	Cooling, heating and ventilation	14	Utensils required for cooking
5	Standard lighting	15	Childcare facilities
6	Adequate fire safety measures	16	Psycho-social counselling
7	Recreation space	17	Referral and transport
8	First aid	18	Facilitation for convergence with other services
9	Pest and mosquito control	19	Linkages with entitlement to schemes related to social security, health and food
10	Bedding		

researchers involved in the study. Perception of shelter residents (or inmates, as has been used interchangeably in various reports of Government of India) as end users of shelters has been sought to evaluate the importance of mandatory services. This paper hence contributes to the literature on homelessness by taking a critical look at the condition of homeless shelters in four cities of the State of Uttar Pradesh in North India, namely, Allahabad, Varanasi, Lucknow and Agra. The specific objectives of the study are:

- i. To determine the availability and working condition of mandatory services in homeless shelters.
- ii. To ascertain significance of common services mandated by the Supreme Court of India to be provided in such shelters, as perceived by the shelter inmates.

The next section of the paper presents instances of affordable housing/shelters from other countries, followed by a short chronological description of various government schemes in India towards sheltering homeless people. Thereafter we have elaborated on the perceived relevance of this research. The section on research plan illustrates how data has been collected, followed by findings from data analysis. Subsequently conclusions, recommendations, study limitations and directions for future research have been discussed.

2. Affordable housing provisions for urban poor: some international instances

“From the 1950s onwards housing theory and practice was underpinned by a focus on direct government provision of public housing for rent or sale” (UN-Habitat, 2011 p. 5). Housing problems of underdeveloped nations, observes Steinberg (1982), have gained limelight since housing was declared in the 1976 UN-Habitat Conference as an important aspect of basic human needs that must be fulfilled through development efforts. Developing nations have been responding to the issues of housing shortage by formulation of national shelter strategies since the last two decades (UN-Habitat, 2011). For example, homeless people in Peru and Egypt are permitted to live in government-owned, poor quality lands for long time and are also legally recognized in many cases (Speak & Tipple, 2003). In the Philippines the poor are encouraged to own a home through several approaches like end-user financing and public funds. The housing subsidy system in South Africa aims at making housing affordable for all, to overcome mass homelessness. Under this system a single house of 20–30 m² is provided on freehold plots with full services (Speak & Tipple, 2003).

With the exception of Hong Kong and Singapore [having around 84% of its resident population living in public housing (Yuen, KWEE, & Tu, 2006)], all Asian countries are characterized by imbalance between urban growth and construction of affordable housing, resulting in mushrooming of slums and informal settlements in urban areas (UN-Habitat, 2011). Housing affordability in China, especially for rural migrants, is a serious social and economic issue (Lin, Meulder, Cai, Hu, & Lai, 2014). China has significantly changed its social housing provision system to assist the urban poor through either means-tested housing benefits or direct housing allocation. Zhao (forthcoming) has explored the factors that have contributed to the development of informal housing in China, by considering gated informal housing communities in Beijing. Land banks and community land trusts act as providers of affordable housing to distressed neighbourhoods in Japan (Fujii, 2016).

In Malaysia, low-income households that are deprived of home ownership under the Public Low Cost Housing programme are offered sites-and-services schemes by the government. Similar schemes are offered to evicted slum dwellers by the National Housing Authority in Bangkok (UN-Habitat, 2011). Ministry of Environment, Government of Pakistan has implemented strict policy measures to control the growth of temporary settlements (i.e., *katchi abadis*) in 2001, by prohibiting

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