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SOCIAL ISSUES

War on beggars

AJOY ASHIRWAD MAHAPRASHASTA

Delhi gets rid of its beggars in order to showcase the capital as a world-class city ahead of the Commonwealth Games.

MANVENDER VASHIST/PTI



A woman with her newborn begs on a street of New Delhi. A November 2009 photograph.

IN a drive that began in April, ahead of the Commonwealth Games scheduled for October, the Delhi government is sending back beggars found on the streets of the National Capital Region to the towns and villages from which they migrated. Firm about dealing with the "social menace", the government has formed 13 teams to round up beggars and declared 12 "zero-tolerance zones". Two mobile courts are already in operation to prosecute beggars.

Delhi's Social Welfare Minister Mangat Ram Singhal has a ready explanation for these measures:

"Beggars are a nuisance, and begging has to be stopped. When we make Delhi a world-class city, it will be compared with other world capitals. One does not come across beggars in other countries. Why should there be beggars in Delhi?" In another interaction with the press, he said: "We Indians are used to beggars. Westerners are not. So, we must make the city free of them."

Two important facts emerge from the Minister's statements, both made in the context of the preparations for the Games. First, making Delhi a world-class city rests high in the urban imagination of the people's representative. Second, it is India's prestige that is at stake if the poor are seen roaming the streets seeking alms from the visiting foreigners. The goal of making Delhi shine as a well-developed city has led to unprecedented activities in the past five years involving the construction of flyovers, development of a metro rail system, street-scaping, and the renovation of prominent markets. Slums have been cleared and dhabas that dotted the lanes of Delhi removed. The result is a stark rise in the number of homeless people. It is unfortunate that the burden of hosting the Games falls on the city's poor.

Instead of securing the right to livelihood for citizens, the government has maintained that begging is illegal. It has invoked the Bombay Prevention of Beggary Act, 1959, which criminalises begging. The Bombay Act, also applicable to the Union Territory of Delhi and invoked by the Delhi government in 1961, was not enforced until two years ago.

The Act prescribes punishment up to 10 years for a person found begging. It bans begging, vending on roads, cleaning vehicles at traffic junctions, singing for money in buses and displaying physical disability to seek alms. A person penalised under the Bombay Act is sent to a special "beggar court" or is tried by the mobile courts. These courts have suddenly become active under the Delhi government's initiative to remove anyone found vending, squatting or sleeping on the streets, railway stations, bus stops or any other public places.

According to the Social Welfare Department, Delhi has an estimated 60,000 beggars. Of them, 30 per cent are below 18 years of age; 69.94 per cent of them are males and 30.06 per cent females. But non-governmental organisations claim that there are more than a lakh beggars in the Union Territory. However, a report by Action Aid in 2004 claimed the number was 60,000. A study by the Centre for Media Studies, Delhi, found that around 90 per cent of the beggars in Delhi were migrants from Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, pushed to the national capital by poverty.

Mangat Ram Singhal had announced the setting up of a dozen mobile courts to try arrested beggars. The two mobile courts in operation have tried 60 persons so far. The Delhi government has built 12 shelters, which can house 2,200 inmates. A senior official in the Social Welfare Department said: "We prepare a social investigation report of those arrested under the Beggary Act. We try to find out whether the person had any other means of earning a living. In most of the cases the beggars are found to be professionals who otherwise could have earned a decent living."

Predictably, such an understanding completely ignores the root causes of poverty and migration. With increasing inequality in urban India and the government's excesses in view of the Commonwealth Games, many physically challenged people and economically distressed families are resorting to beggary.

Harsh Mander, a social activist who has filed a public interest petition in the Delhi High Court over the arrest of elderly and sick people on charges of begging, said the poor feared police high-handedness. "It's like a war against the poor," human rights lawyer Colin Gonsalves said. "I would like sportsmen from the Western world and people coming for the Commonwealth Games

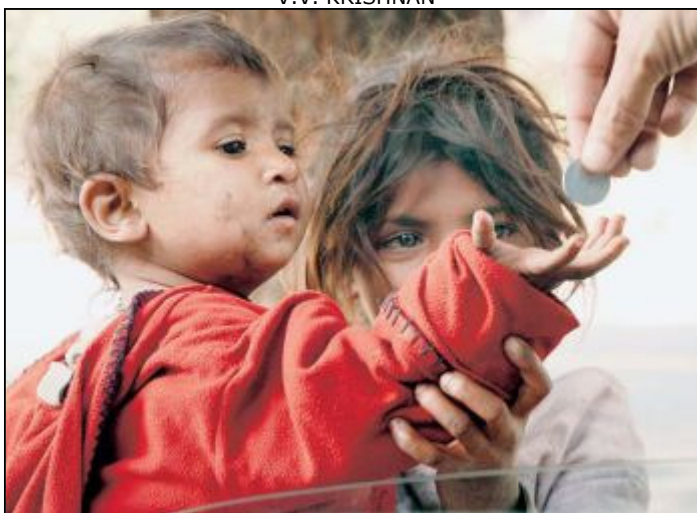
to write letters of protest to our Prime Minister, to Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit and to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and say: 'Please stop this. We don't want you to clean up Delhi for us. We don't mind if people beg,'" he told a national daily.

The universities in Delhi have been instructed to get their hostels vacated during the 12-day sports event, which means even students have to find alternative accommodation. This effectively means that the less powerful people in the city are being made to suffer in the name of national prestige.

HLRN REPORT

Civil rights groups wonder about the sanctity of this kind of development. In the second week of May, Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN), one such group, came up with a detailed report titled "The 2010 Commonwealth Games: Whose wealth? Whose Commons?"

V.V. KRISHNAN



Seeking alms at a traffic signal in New Delhi.

The report delineates some important findings and asks how huge sums of money are being spent on the CWG and whether such funding has been approved by the democratic institutions of the government. The findings of the report are bleak.

It says, "India's decision to bid for CWG '10 was non-transparent and undemocratic and cost the country Rs.137 crore. India offered \$7.2 million to train athletes of all Commonwealth nations – an offer which allegedly clinched the bid in India's favour. The GOI [Government of India] and the Delhi government decided to underwrite costs and budget shortfall of the games, despite the fact that the Ministry of Finance and Department of Expenditure, GOI, cautioned against it in 2003."

It also says that the budget for the CWG has risen from an initial projection of Rs.1,899 crore to an official figure of Rs.10,000 crore and independent expert committee estimates of Rs.30,000 crore.

It has revealed some shocking data. The expenditure on sports infrastructure is already 2,160 per cent of the initially projected budget, and the Union Budget allocation for the Games from the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports rose by 6,235 per cent between 2005-06 and 2009-10. This increase excluded the budget for other infrastructure, beautification projects, and security. A July

2009 report of the Comptroller and Auditor General raised questions about certain financial aspects of the Games, including sponsorships and revenue generation.

Funds for social expenditure have been diverted to manage the Games. For instance, funds from the 2009-10 Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan (Special Component Plan) worth more than Rs.2,500 crore have been diverted to cover the CWG expenditure from 2005-06 to 2006-10, according to the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights report. Over one lakh families have been evicted and 44 slums are to be removed before the Games, according to the Delhi government's figures.

The HLRN report says there is rampant exploitation of workers at the CWG construction sites, which includes low pay, inadequate living conditions and lack of safety equipment. The People's Union of Democratic Rights report in 2007 on the CWG village, too, shows violation of workers' rights in a big way. Most of the projects have not got environment clearances and social impact assessment reports.

The HLRN report concludes that the entire process relating to the Games has been characterised by secrecy, lack of government accountability, and unconstitutional activities. "Preparations for the Games have already resulted in an irreversible alteration in the social, spatial, economic and environmental dimensions of the city of Delhi. Much of this has taken place in contravention of democratic governance and planning process," it says.

"The scale of the CWG and the excessive costs involved are hard to justify in a country that has glaringly high levels of poverty, hunger, inequality, homelessness and malnutrition. When one of three Indians lives below the poverty line and 40 per cent of the world's hungry live in India, when 46 per cent of India's children and 55 per cent of its women are malnourished, does spending thousands of crores of rupees on a 12-day sports event build national pride," said Shivani Chaudhry, associate co-ordinator of HLRN.

It is clear that such development schemes are the result of a particular kind of elite imagination of having a world-class city. The term world class as defined by the Delhi Master Plan is exclusionary. It says that a world-class city is where you can have mega sporting events and high tourism revenues and can hold international conventions. It hardly matters to the government that the infrastructure built during the Asian Games in 1982 is lying largely unused. The government appears to be racing towards a goal without any legal and moral commitment to its own people.

Amitabh Kundu, an urban economist with Jawaharlal Nehru University, summarises the situation best: "It is a process of exclusionary urbanisation that is at work. Such urbanisation has already started to show its impact. From 1991 to 2001, the overall rate of migration has actually declined. The nature of migration has changed. Delhi is allowing only skilled and semi-skilled workers into its territory. There is a formalisation of the informal sector. There is no space in a modern Indian city for the most marginalised and the most poor."



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