Sociology and the vagrant in India: The 'beggar problem' and the Delhi School of Social Work

Author: Prof. William Gould (Twitter: @willgupshup)

In 1955 a postgraduate unit of the University of Delhi, the Delhi School of Social Work, undertook a detailed sociological study of 'the beggar problem' in Delhi. Led by Madhav Sadashiv Gore, the School's Principal and later a key figure in the social sciences academy in India, the study represented the most complete sociological analysis of vagrancy and begging of its time. Drawing up detailed data from 600 interviewees (out of an estimated beggar population of 3000), and conducting fieldwork on 5 separate settlements or colonies, *The Beggar Problem in Metropolitan Delhi,* published in 1959 was part of a series sponsored by the Research Programmes Committee of the Planning Commission and employed some of the latest approaches in the discipline. Gore and his three co-authors collected data on family, family habits, schooling, childhood experiences, religious background, vocational and work history, personal life and friendship, current 'professional' life (based on 39 detailed questions meticulously capturing daily life); attitudes towards the future; disability; and mendicancy. In the latter area it drew on an earlier study of 1945 by M Vasudeva Moorthy. The study explored the broader societal conditions for beggars in a large Indian city. As a result it revealed the nature of interactions between policies of development/planning, the welfare state and social science research. But it also showed how the application of the social sciences was conditioned by ideas about Indian secularism, modernity, the role of the state, and a historicism drawn from Europe.
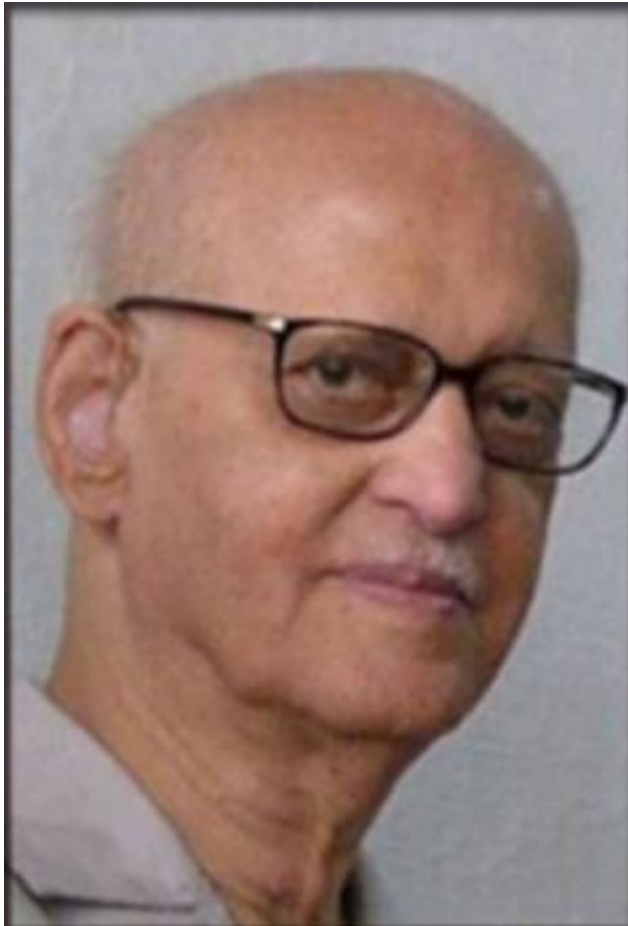
Gore's study was in many ways less about the problem of the individual in society, and more about the frame of societal responses to the individual (or community of) vagrants. The authors explicitly admitted the importance of psychology but deliberately omitted its approaches. In other words, rather than simply focusing on the beggar, the study elaborated on a series of assumptions about changes to welfare over time, the role of the state and the notion of the new citizen.

Like other studies of its time, *The Beggar Problem* self-consciously positioned its research and recommendations as distinctly post-colonial. India's Constitution drafters sought to reform older, colonial views on inherited criminality, and its attendant assumptions about primordialism and evolutionism. Similarly, in studying beggars, the Delhi school sought to establish the 'rehabilitability' of vagrants rather than the reinforcement of penal institutions and punishments. It called for the association of beggars in the management of new institutions, and recommended policy makers move away from anti-beggar legislation in the form of long-standing Municipalities Acts and Police Acts from the 1910s-20s.These were associated with older European legislative approaches to vagrancy. Instead the authors stressed the need to recognize the 'social realities' of beggars. Drawing on post-war social constructivism and C H Cooley's 'Looking Glass Self', the study dedicated individual chapters to detailed, ethnographic case studies around 'Working Life of beggars', 'Society of the Beggars', and 'Social Life in Beggar Communities'.

THE BEGGAR PROBLEM
IN
METROPOLITAN DELHI

DELHI SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
3, University Road
DELHI
1959

Yet, in reflecting on how beggar society formed its own ecosystem, the study set out to unpack the logic of beggars' interaction with society, rooted in the concept of giving/receiving and what the authors described as 'indiscriminate charity'. How far beggars might be rehabilitated depended, according to this logic, on the extent to which begging had become socially acceptable. Concepts such as *bhiksha* - the giving/receiving of donations given to Brahmins in religious charity, which characterized both mendicant

begging, but also extended into other forms of 'indiscriminate charity'– was its archetypal form. By extension, individual charity did not help 're-education'. Instead, the authors wrote, 'they [are] attitudes more characteristic of a class and caste-ridden society than of the equalitarian society which we visualise' (203).

The study, therefore, implied that a serious programme of rehabilitation would necessarily be secular, not simply in the forms of state run institutions created, but also in terms of how giving and charity itself might be secularized. In its chapter on 'Society and the Beggar', the authors argued that 'Religion, thus, not only accepted and encouraged "giving", it made "giving" a necessary part of the way of life that it enjoined through its caste structure. Therefore the giving was not for the taker but for the giver to fulfill a sense of religious merit… if a recipient could not be found he had to be discovered' (77). This led to 'dissociation between the act of giving and the situation of need', and gave some social status to 'receiving'. It obliterated the distinction between 'work' and 'begging'. Yet, the authors concurred, it was often difficult to distinguish between the outward material conditions of existence of India's low-income groups and the destitute in the country's cities.

The 'problem' here was not just the existence, and proliferation however of fake mendicant beggars with dubious sexual proclivities (which the report noted in its case studies). The more important problem was one of wastefulness, and the encouragement of unproductivity. The wastage on 'indiscriminate charity' was set out in lost labour hours, amounting, the report claimed, to 3 million 'man hours', or 9 lakh rupees per year. In contrast, the authors analysed the work, attitudes and social realities of 'handicapped' beggars according to different criteria, since it was assumed that they were inherently 'unproductive' (152).

As the fieldworkers moved deeper into the beggar colonies, they discovered that many of the disabled beggars, predominantly lepers, were also faking their condition. Fake bandages, or the pouring of 'lac' onto limbs to attract flies (a finely developed skill) could be part of a beggar's means of association or moral justification. These, rather than the deserving 'unproductive' beggars were the 'deviants', moving against the normative categories of society.

But more broadly, *The Beggar Problem* exhibited a number of other contemporary preoccupations about national development, the new roles of the state, and a rapidly changing society. The study was concerned by changes to family structure and the authority of the caste panchayat created by rapid urban change, and the 'break up' of family was a primary factor in explorations of beggar motivation. The study, however, also inadvertently revealed other contemporary ideas about social inclusion and national belonging. Just as India was being reorganized linguistically, the report noted throughout that beggars from southern states speaking minority languages were both less socially isolated, and more likely to live in mixed communities with non-beggars. Rather than reflect on language communities themselves though, the report noted this as evidence of 'reformability' and the need for preventative measures, since, 'it may be said, without fear of contradiction, that social science has today accepted the overwhelming significance of one's social environmental factors in the development of attitudes and habits of mind' (198).