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## **JUST HOW OBSERVANT ARE WE? NAMELESS FACE IN THE FACELESS CROWD: IS HUMANITY OVERRATED?**

Dr. S. Krishnan<sup>1</sup>

She sat in a dark corner in the midst of a world of glitz and glamour where nothing seemed amiss. In the darkness that had engulfed her sight, she couldn't see what others could see. But did they open their eyes to what they should have seen?

It is a pretty well-known and unabashedly acknowledged fact that we live in a highly materialistic world where almost everyone chases after something or the other. None care enough to open their eyes and take a look around or keep their ears open to hear what should be heard. All that people are keen on running after is success in some form or the other, even if it comes at a cost. But when the cost is sacrificing your humane instincts, is it worth it? This is a question one has to ask oneself today.

I can think of various instances when I've felt that the sense of being humane is fast-evading to mankind or humanity. The tendency to be elusive seems to be its substitute and most certainly, a crude one. None knows or cares about what is happening around and about anymore, so unlike a time when concern was a primary emotion that came naturally to a human being.

Delhi, or as we like to call it: "*Dil Walon ka Shehar*" (the city of the largehearted), has been merciless when it comes to looking after the people who have been living on its streets. A city, where people from all across the country come seeking jobs and other opportunities, also has an ugly face in the form of exploitation of the homeless women living on

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the streets. Cases of brutal rape and murder of women living on the streets force me to think twice about the kind of society we live in. It is a society where women are not even safe inside their own homes. Obviously, it is too far-fetched a dream to think of homeless women being safe and protected from the “male gaze” on the streets of Delhi.

Statistics from the Municipal Corporation of Delhi reveal that there are around 1.5 lakh homeless people in Delhi, while shelters in the city can only support a maximum of 9,000. So, around 10,000 homeless women in the country's capital, have barely five shelters to rely on.

One winter night in New Delhi in 2013, I was out in one of the most active parts of the capital city, Connaught Place, where luxury entwines its arms around you, when I was met with a very disturbing sight which made me open my eyes and look beyond that circle of glamour and materialistic pleasure offered by a place deemed to be cosy in all respects. On that bitter winter night, we ran into a woman, a poor vagabond, who was sitting outside a McDonald's joint which was bustling with activity. She sat right across from its doors and it would've been hard for anyone to miss catching a glimpse of the bundle of rags as the lights fell on her. A glass from McDonald's lay in front of her and in it were the earnings of the day – a few coins. She doesn't utter a word as people pass by or when a passer-by tosses her a coin. Her face stays blank and her head is bent down as if resigned to the world around her and her plight. But was that the reality? No. The reality as we saw then was more shocking than anything I had seen in all my life until then.

As I drew closer to the bundle of rags that she was, the door to McDonald's opened and a beam of light brought her into full sight for all to see. She sat there, leaning against the pillars with her legs sprawled before her, covered in shreds of clothes which failed to conceal the small bulge of her belly. In the light that fell on her bent head, I saw what I

had failed to see earlier... she was not a mere homeless girl. I called up the women constables for helping the 'homeless' and 'nameless' people and medical testing was done. It was found shocking that she was raped by her own husband. She was someone our society should have treated with utmost care and concern. She was oblivious to the world around her not because she had reconciled to her fate, but because she was actually oblivious to it. She was a special person who had been born into a world of darkness, deprived of sight and the ability to know the world as we know it.

I was reminded of what Aristotle had said, that 'man is a rational animal'. Right then, I felt that man is but an animal. How crude and cruel a society do we live in that a homeless young girl who happens to be a specially-abled person is apparently raped and made pregnant?! During that night when the capital had been hit by a cold wave, she sat hardly clad in enough clothes to cover her, forget keeping herself warm. People walked by, throwing her looks of disgust and revulsion rather than feel even remotely sympathetic with her situation. I looked around then to see that she wasn't the only vagabond there, plenty of them roamed that place where luxury met hardcore poverty. An India which people fail to see. An India none wants to see. It can be hard to see your own culture. Like oxygen, it is everywhere and easily taken for granted.

I can almost hear the desperate screams and feel the fear bubbling up like battery acid in my veins. A fury grips me because, yet again, the homeless people especially women are left on the streets with no home of their own in India. Why do I care? Because I am a human being. The country I grew up in has moved far ahead in space technology but we continue to fail these homeless people. We fail to keep them safe – the fundamental right of every woman. Here, on the other side, we are celebrating "*International Women's Day*". What is the point of

celebrating it when roughly 80 % of women who are raped are ignored or treated as “*Outcasts*” by other women??

Another city Mumbai or ‘Bombay’ is quite well known for being the ‘City of Dreams’. The city has seen a diversity of migration constantly taking place for better jobs, better lifestyles and a fulfilment of a long-awaited dream. While travelling to Bombay, one must observe the concrete jungle where people from all the socio-economic strata are co-existing, balancing and adjusting with one another. With the distance between the sky and the land, and the moments before touching the ground, one can see the spatiality from above and that there is no separation of societies but everything cramped up together. From the fascination with Shah Rukh Khan’s house to the exoticization of Asia’s biggest slum, Dharavi, this city gives multiple lenses to be looked through.

This is the general description of Mumbai that we usually find in books and movies where the city is a big umbrella of a homogeneous society that gives shelter to all. But in reality, this homogenization doesn’t really exist. In addition to several social factors like class, caste, religion etc., the pandemic has ripped off the band-aid to show how there are people who are completely alienated regardless of anything, which is proven by the existence of the homeless, extreme poverty and of people who are not even a part of Dharavi.

The 2011 census stated that there are 57,411 homeless people in the city of Mumbai alone. The approximate number of homeless people is alarming because the number of existing shelter homes for the homeless is much less than the total number of homeless people. As much as Mumbai monsoons are romanticized, they have been disastrous for the homeless community. While the rich are enjoying the rain from their balconies, the alienated people on the roads find themselves afflicted with diseases such as pneumonia, for instance. The irony is that the homeless people are everywhere on the roads, as much

as they are found on the busy platforms of the trains, they are also seen on the roads of the posh Bandra locality, and yet, they are invisible to society, as majority remain undocumented by the census report.

This constant lack of recognition of the homeless has further led to many crimes of rape, abuse and violation of the poorest of the poor. Every homeless person in Mumbai has a backstory of what led them to the streets; some ran away from abusive households, some were abandoned on the streets, some lost their home and work, etc. A lot of women who were subjected to domestic abuse fled away to the streets of urban spaces looking for a better life but in turn, they are exposed to more sexual assault and abuse considering the lack of security and shelter homes.

Poverty, lack of education, social disparity, religious divide and ignorance are some of the reasons often given for this plague that seems to be gripping India. But the answer perhaps lies far deeper in a centuries-old culture that repeatedly refuses to value 50 per cent of its population. They forget that the Y chromosome cannot exist without the X chromosome. As per the Indian National Crime Records Bureau report released in 2016, a homeless woman is sexually abused every 15 minutes in the country, of which more than 60 per cent are women.

Culture – that invisible omnipresent force that we are born into and then grow up in until we take certain things for granted – like if you work hard you will succeed, ice cream should go with apple pie, and violence to varying degrees of severity is an expected component of the female experience. I know the last statement is a strong one. But its veracity is revealed when you think about a variation of its alternative — *“women do not face unique threats to their physical safety in our culture.”* I suspect that not many would agree with this statement. Further, the degree to which women fear physical and sexual violence reveals the extent to which our culture is telling them they are

vulnerable. It also is an indicator that women themselves believe they are at greater risk.

Delhi is no exception to what Kahlil Gibran says about cities. Or rather compared to other cities of India, Delhi fares the worst, in terms of the way the poor are treated. Amongst the poor, the homeless (which includes: Children, Women, Elderly, Destitute, Disabled, Mentally Challenged etc) i.e. the people who sleep on the pavements, rickshaws, handcarts, railway platforms, flyovers in the park, under the bridges etc.

Women of all ages gather here every night, in their begrimed, frayed discoloured areas. Some are alone, others tend sick, disabled or drunken male partners, still, others fiercely protect their children in the dusty spaces that are their homes without roofs or walls. Children wander around, bringing cheer and mischief. Older men grope for the women's unprotected bodies in the uneasy grey darkness of the city's night, and the policemen intermittently assault them with their batons and taunts. I will always remember the distraught faces of a group of these women late one night, as two policemen confiscated and set fire to the tiny, grubby, bundles of their entire life's belongings. Tempers always seem to run high here, as women quarrel or a man suddenly smashes an empty liquor bottle on a woman's head.

We live in times when more often than not; the streets are lined by faces instead of trees. These faces observe us quietly as we rush past, lost in our own bubble of worries. Faces crisscrossed by the vagaries of living on the roads and living under the shadow of the skyscrapers. They remain nameless, homeless and in a way, faceless for how often do we stop to notice those who man the pavements? The answer is probably never.

It is extremely difficult to get to know these women. Their lives are so brutally unremittingly public and yet encased in hard, defensive shells. There are many widows among them or abandoned wives or women who have survived and escaped violent partners. Some are themselves grown-up children of street women. Some women are almost always in a daze, drunk or drugged. Some talk compulsively, but the conversation typically is disjointed and inarticulate. Others are withdrawn and resolutely silent, hiding untold grief. Almost without exception, they all display diverse symptoms of some or the other forms of mental distress. It is almost impossible for any of them to survive long on the streets without taking resort to casual sex work or intermittent begging, in order to supplement their efforts to subsist by petty pavement trade or occasional wage labour.

And yet, if you persist long enough in this unlikely community of the dispossessed, you recognize these to be women of extraordinary valour in the daily grimy battlefields of their utterly besieged lives. For a woman whose only home is the street or the open city ground, the inhospitable biting chill of winter nights or the foul deluge of the monsoons are the least of the trials.

At a very conservative estimate, Delhi has at least 10,000 homeless women. They sleep under flyovers, on pavements, in drainage pipes and under staircases. According to the UN, homeless people are “*those sleeping without shelter, in constructions not meant for habitation and in welfare institutions.*” Even though the government provides shelters, they are few and far between. With just five shelters in the whole city, homeless women in Delhi are left to the mercy of extreme weather conditions, drunken men and starvation.

I had the opportunity to talk to a homeless woman in her late 40s. She expressed strong disdain for the Delhi Police and ultimately feels that

they are not doing anything to help the homeless in that area; the Delhi Police are only criminalizing them and making their situations worse.

It is obvious that the Delhi Police is dealing with many problems in Delhi, but the homeless are also dealing with many problems themselves. She said that *“with their stress, and the stress that we have ourselves, they are making it worse, making us bow down to their crap.”* She emphasized that the police are not helping the homeless. She further said that *“they (the police) are not doing anything but putting more money in their own pocket.”*

When asked if she would like to see changes in how the police behave around homeless people in Delhi, she said, *“I don’t give a damn about the police. They can drop dead. Anybody who wears a uniform and represents our government is bad.”* She shares the sentiment of many other homeless people around the area. They do not feel that the city is responding adequately by putting more cops out on the streets to harass the homeless.

According to Indu-Prakash Singh, who leads the campaign for the homeless at the Indo-Global Social Service Society (IGSSS), says: *“Many of them are subject to rape on the streets, many of them are beaten by the police and sexual favours are taken...we have seen it with our own eyes how they are treated on the streets.”*

The playing field of life is not level. Never has been and never will be. There are many in India, who knows this to be true. But our society has been blinded by materialism to such an extent that it was becoming less humane by the second. When we fail to sympathize and empathize, we are becoming less human beings and more an animal. Happiness and grief are but two halves of the wheel of time. It is forever in motion and people fail to realise that they await their turn. Life is too precious and by this, I mean anyone’s life.

*“I have been homeless.”* Real misery is not lacking a place to sleep. No, the real gut-wrenching misery comes from knowing that nobody cares....knowing that nobody gives a damn whether you live or die. It is at that moment, under the weight of that realization that death appears to be a viable alternative.

Daily life on the streets makes people face a diversity of situations that involve challenges, such as access to food and transportation, financial difficulties, vices, and social stigma. Although in a lesser number, homeless women become more vulnerable to living in a context permeated by prejudice, violence, and inequality of gender and social rights. Studies show that a majority of homeless women are victims of violence: Women who finally leave abusive relationships often have nowhere to go, and many resorts to trading sex for shelter, food, money, alcohol, or drugs. Alone on the streets, homeless women become especially vulnerable to abuse, manipulation, and murder.

The National Network to End Domestic Violence reports that more than 90 per cent of women who are homeless have experienced severe physical or sexual abuse at some point in their lives. A study sponsored by the National Institute of Drug Abuse showed that 41 per cent of a randomly selected sample of 460 women staying in homeless shelters had been sexually abused by an adult before age 18. Abuse erodes women’s self-esteem and leaves them more vulnerable to exploitation if they manage to run away and end up homeless.

Homelessness is a stubborn form of denial, and it does not seem easy for people to escape it once they slip into it. There seem many roads that lead men and women, boys and girls to make the city streets their home, but few that lead away from the streets to settled homes.

Whichever city that I have settled for the job, I have passed the homeless on the streets of the city as part of my daily routine work. In

the twilight, they live their lives on the roads where luxury cars race during the day. They live their entire lives amidst us, in front of us – literally – but we never see them. Instead, we spend heavily on film tickets when Danny Boyle tells us the story of a ‘slumdog’ who turns a millionaire. But the story of millions of such nameless, faceless slumdogs still remains untold.

I have often wondered about what life was like for those nameless individuals before their days of living on the street. Especially in the winter, I wondered how they manage to survive the cold. Where do they go at night? Do they have a family? What are their hopes? Their desires? They are Indians, as much as you and I are, but a cruel twist of fate has rendered them ‘homeless’ or ‘lost hope’ or ‘lost in plain sight.

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