

An integrated policy for welfare of the homeless is the need of the hour



- M. Anthony Stephen, A.D. Nandini and Vanesa Peter

A social justice-based approach is needed to establish and strengthen the rights of the homeless people living on the roadside in Tamil Nadu. These people's needs are only met under the single scheme of 'temporary accommodation'. No policy worth its salt has so far been formulated over the housing rights of the people living in families for many generations without roof over their heads. The scheme in existence for namesake has not either allocated fund to rehabilitate the destitute people living on the margins of roads and the old, the mentally challenged, the differently abled and the transgenders left down and out in public spaces.

The Greater Chennai Corporation and the police department have separately been engaged in the mission to redeem the homeless left on the roadside. The Chennai Corporation alone has set up accommodation centres for the elderly, the differently abled, the mentally challenged and the transgenders. No such humanitarian work is done in other corporations, municipalities and town

panchayats where no rehabilitation is carried out for the down-and-outs.

Back in 2011, about 37,117 people in the urban areas of Tamil Nadu were identified as the homeless in the census held then. But these statistics cannot be regarded as reliable and definite because the census was not conducted with proper understanding.

The scheme that hardly paid off

The Union Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs in 1992 introduced an exclusive scheme for the urban homeless. The state housing board introduced the scheme named as 'shelter and sanitation facilities for slum-dwellers in urban areas', which was renamed as 'urban homeless night shelter' in 2002. But the scheme was dropped in 2005 because of non-allocation of proper funds. The Supreme Court, taking note of the abysmal condition of the homeless in 2010, directed the union and state governments to set up in the first phase 24/7 permanent shelters for the homeless in 62 towns. At least 100 out of one lakh urban people must be given bedding with blankets, drinking water and sanitation, first aid, narcotic prevention and entertainment facilities; the shelters having all these amenities must function for 24 hours a day for 365 days, the court directive said. And 30 per cent of the rehabilitation centres must be allocated for single women, the mentally challenged, the elderly and those affected in some other ways, the apex court said, directing all states to provide shelters to all the homeless. This scheme will from time to time be reviewed, it added.

New scheme

In 2013, under the National Urban Livelihood Mission (NULM), the scheme named as Shelter for Urban Homeless (SUH) was introduced and later re-christened as Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana (DAY). This scheme, recognising the role of the homeless in the economic development of the towns, had set the goal of

providing permanent shelters with basic amenities to them. At present, 150 shelters are functioning under the scheme in Tamil Nadu. But the catch is that the union government will not allot funds for the shelters functioning for more than five years. So, the burden has befallen the states. But there is no state-level definite policy or scheme on this count. Hence, the shelters run the risk of closure. Against this background, the need has arisen now for the state government to draw up a solid scheme with proper funds for the welfare of the homeless. Besides, the state must formulate policies that will ensure temporary housing, cluster settlements, rental housing schemes or permanent housing depending on individuals' needs. Those policies will in the long run ensure the welfare of the homeless.

Why an integrated policy is needed

A coordination among the government departments is badly needed to fulfil the needs of social and economic rehabilitation of the homeless and to ensure them various social rights such as bank accounts, skill training, job opportunities, livelihood help (entrepreneurial scheme or loans), education and maintenance of children, old age pension, aid for the destitute and widowed women, assistance for the differently abled. In this context, socio-psychological initiatives are also needed to free the narcotic substance addicts and rehabilitate them. It is imperative to rope in the social welfare department for enabling the abandoned people to get reunited with their families. In case of the families being not identified or the families being unwilling to take in their abandoned members, the forsaken people should be recommended for an institutional maintenance. In this respect, an integrated government policy with coordination among all departments is highly required.

The homeless have been pushed into an abysmal state where they are languishing in want of food, clothes and shelter. They do not possess citizenship documents either. Living in the vagaries of nature - rain and shine - they are the most affected in times of big

natural disasters. They are the most miserable lot, denied even the semblance of a decent life.

So, it is the need of the hour to draw up a beneficial housing policy for facilitating the homeless to lead a decent life with all basic amenities. After all, October 10 is the World Homeless Day!

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