A Study of Street Beggars

This is perhaps the first systematic socio-economic survey of a neglected stratum of Indian society. The Director of the Survey, Professor Iyengar, says in the introduction that recently, such surveys were conducted in Madras, Bombay, and Delhi. In spite of repeated requests, literature and data with regard to these surveys could not be had. Considering these initial handicaps, the ubiquitous paucity of funds notwithstanding the generous donation of HEH The Nizam's Charitable Trust — and the intrinsic difficulties of applying recognised investigational techniques to such intractable material, the present survey must be given due credit as a commendable attempt. It covers such diverse aspects of the beggar problem as the causes and techniques of begging, health conditions, economic status, social life, and immigration. By far the most interesting feature of the survey is the series of case studies of beggars, which give flesh and blood as it were to the bare bones of the statistical sections. These studies, which account for 21 out of the 2,419 samples examined in the course of the survey, "go some way in throwing light on certain aspects of street beggar life, which could not possibly be treated adequately in the Report proper".

According to the Report, the number of street beggars in the Hyderabad-Secunderabad City Area is roughly estimated at about 5,000. The survey covered 2,419 street samples out of whom 1,259 were males and 1,160 females. The response of the beggars was generally satisfactory and only 48 refused to answer questions absolutely while 37 refused to undergo medical examination. The timing of the enquiries was also suitably regulated with a view to maximum response and coverage; for instance, mid-day in market centres and mornings and evenings in durgahs and temples. The enquiry was conducted at 51 centres — an average of 40.1 cases per centre — with no judicial powers or police assistance.

The main findings of the survey are interesting. In regard to the communal distribution of beggars though communal feelings were conspicuously absent among beggars as well as donors — it was found that Muslims were predominant, accounting for 1,048 out of the 2,419 samples. This is ascribed to the economic dislocation following the Police Action, the abolition of jagirs, the disbandment of the regular and irregular armed forces, and also to the fact that Muslim charities are relatively liberal. Among scheduled castes, hereditary beggars were prominent.

The principal factors in begging were mental and physical infirmity (644), old age (509), heredity (508), inadequate income of family (350) and unemployment (138). Immigrant beggars (903) mostly came from within the Hyderabad State. Immigration was mostly due to the vexations of village money lenders and the prospects of better alms and medical treatment in the city.

The Report also makes several suggestions towards solving, or at least mitigating, the beggar problem e.g. through establishment of relief and corrective Institutions to be financed partly by a graduated Poor Tax at 2 1/2—10 per cent on property and professions by local authorities. The Report poses the question whether street beggars should not be "provided, at the minimum the standard of life of convicted and sentenced prisoners"?

The Report is written in a lively style and with a shrewd eye on the paradoxes of contemporary social life. There are a number of photographs with arresting captions. Among the memorable case studies are those of "Mahbub All" whose opening gambit "I have seen you at Sir Akbar Hydari's house" takes in many an unsuspecting motorist at the petrol pump, and the Arab pensioner who downs his entire monthly pension of Rs 15 in a single day's ganja session!

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