

Experiencing Homelessness: the Case of a Women's Shelter near Jama Masjid, Delhi

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In January 2010, the Supreme Court of India ordered the government of Delhi to provide night shelters to the homeless people in the city. The order also directed the government to provide blankets, basic amenities such as water, sanitation and food entitlements to the homeless people. The government responded by appointing a “Mother NGO”: The St. Stephens Hospital in Delhi, which would be the overall coordinator of NGOs undertaking the work of setting up and running these shelters. The Centre for Equity Studies, a Delhi-based NGO, set up a shelter for “single women” in the Urdu Park opposite the Jama Masjid in the old part of the city in January 2012. The shelter was made out of tin on the outside, painted blue and lined with cardboard inside.

The shelter was intended for women who were alone on the streets, some of them with their children, for a range of reasons ranging from widowhood, escaping abusive marriages, rural poverty and migration for work. However, when the shelter was surveyed by a group of researchers for a study on the theme of destitution in the summer of 2012, it was found that most of the homeless women there were in fact not single. Many of them had husbands or partners who were rickshaw-pullers in the

vicinity, and yet others had developed relationships with men for the sake of protection from sexual abuse on the streets.

The area flanking the Jama Masjid is Muslim-dominated, and houses many eateries which serve Muslim food, as well as several small street-side vendors who sell all kinds of household articles ranging from clothes, blankets and utensils to cosmetics and under-garments. The Urdu Park, which adjoins the Meena Bazaar, a marketplace where all these vendors sell their goods, is a public space easily accessible to everyone who visits that area. It is a park with multiple uses. While the homeless people use it to put up their shacks and sleep at night, young boys from the vicinity use it as a sports field to play cricket. During the interviews, most women stated that it was not “easy being a single woman” in this neighbourhood, since a variety of people frequented it for different reasons. As a bustling religious and commercial centre, however, it was easy to get “free food” from religious charities. The eateries in the vicinity distributed leftover food to the poor at the end of the day. Also, many people who come to offer prayers at the Masjid gave food to the less privileged as a part of their religious rituals. Hence, many homeless people flocked to the area since they “did not have to worry about their meals” (Source: information obtained through interviews with homeless women in May-June, 2012 by the author).

Located in the middle of a crowded area, it was almost impossible to have any kind of privacy for the homeless women who lived around the Jama Masjid. Before the shelter was built, most of the men and women were sleeping under the open sky. There was a paid bathroom and toilet facility built by an organisation that the women would use for their sanitary needs, but many unsafe and illegal activities went on in and around the park. For instance, there was a hoodlum who was pedalling drugs in the park, and many children had become addicted to these drugs, most prominently to sniffing spirits. The researchers found that there was also a human trafficking racket operating in the area. In all, there was

danger of abuse and trafficking lurking for homeless single women and their children. The homeless men and women in the park also shared an uneasy relationship with the police and municipal authorities before the formal shelter came up. Their presence on the streets was threatened by the police, who “cracked their whip” on these people frequently (source: information from primary interviews done by the author in May 2012).

As a strategy to protect themselves, many of these women, who had left their husbands’ homes and arrived in the old part of the city to find work, got into relationships with men who offered to marry and “protect” them from the streets. This was an acceptable and convenient arrangement for both, as they found a partner to take care of and be cared for while in a difficult situation. For the researchers, however, it was difficult to understand the nuances of such relationships, since the women at the shelter were not very comfortable discussing them. For instance, while interviewing one who claimed to be the only Hindu woman in the Muslim dominated shelter at Urdu Park, I found that she was hesitant to reveal that she had married an already-married man after she arrived. She and her six children had left an abusive marriage to an alcoholic husband. The NGO had helped her to rebuild her life. She had sent her three daughters and a son to the children’s homes run by the NGO, where they were receiving an education, shelter and food, and a healthier environment than the streets to grow up. She was thankful for this support from the NGO that ensured safety for her children. She defended her “second marriage” by saying that it would not be easy for her to survive alone at this place without her second husband, who was an emotional support for her and her children. She also said that she never stopped her current partner from sending money to his first wife, whom she claimed was “mentally challenged.” Thus, she had countered the problem of being sexually abused by multiple men on the streets. Other interviewees revealed that there was peer pressure on them to get into relationships with men from other women in the shelter. Women

with partners would dominate the shelter space and nag the “single” women to get into relationships. These relationships would help women improve their social acceptance in the shelter, as women without partners would be constructed as “loose” and “available” (source: primary survey).

Women at the shelter had complex stories to share which were difficult to fully comprehend by middle-class researchers like us; more so, since the details of their lives that they provided varied across conversations on different days. What one could, however, grasp was that the space called Urdu Park was criss-crossed by multiple actors, multiple processes and multiple conflicts going on simultaneously. There was a historically significant mosque whose Imam (head priest) saw the homeless people as a menace, and wanted to cleanse the area of them (source, newspaper reports from August 2014). There was also the state apparatus, such as the police and the municipal authorities, that was largely hostile toward the homeless. Then there were the NGOs that were trying to provide basic services to the homeless to enable them to live with dignity; there were young men playing cricket in the field who eyed and teased the women in the shelter (source: primary survey); there were drug peddlers and human traffickers in the vicinity; and finally there were the homeless men and women themselves, who were on the receiving end of multiple atrocities and generosities. Although the plight of the homeless women in Jama Masjid had improved after the intervention by the state and the NGOs, the challenges of drugs, human trafficking, class-based hostility and bias still threatened their existence.

There were multiple and often conflicting processes of empowerment and disempowerment operating simultaneously at the women’s shelter at Jama Masjid. Complexity and conflict were embedded there. Doreen Massey (2003, 2005) provides a valuable theorisation of simultaneity in space that captures this complexity. She argues that space is the “sphere of the possibility of the existence of plurality, of the co-existence of difference. It is the sphere of the possibility of the existence of more-

than-one. Without space there is no ‘multiplicity’ in that sense.” Furthermore, she says that multiple possibilities exist in the same space based on the interrelations between the different actors. Massey posits that space has time/s within it. This is not the static simultaneity of a closed system, but a simultaneity of movements (Massey, 2003:109).

Drawing from Massey’s work, one can hope that with progressive court orders such as the one in January, 2010, followed by concerted interventions by the state and the civil society organisations, the institutional bias against homeless communities will lessen, and they will move towards more socially inclusive and accepted lives in the city.

References

- Massey, D. 2003. Sometimes of Space. *Olafur Eliasson: The Weather Project*
http://www.olafureliasson.net/publications/download_texts/Some_times_of_space.pdf accessed on 12/12/2009.
- Massey, D. 2005. *For Space*. London: Sage.

Pictures:



Chawri bazaar adjoining Jama Masjid in Old Delhi (Author's photo)



Access road to Jama Masjid from Chawri Bazaar (Author's photo)



Meena Bazaar, flanking Jama Masjid (Author's photo)

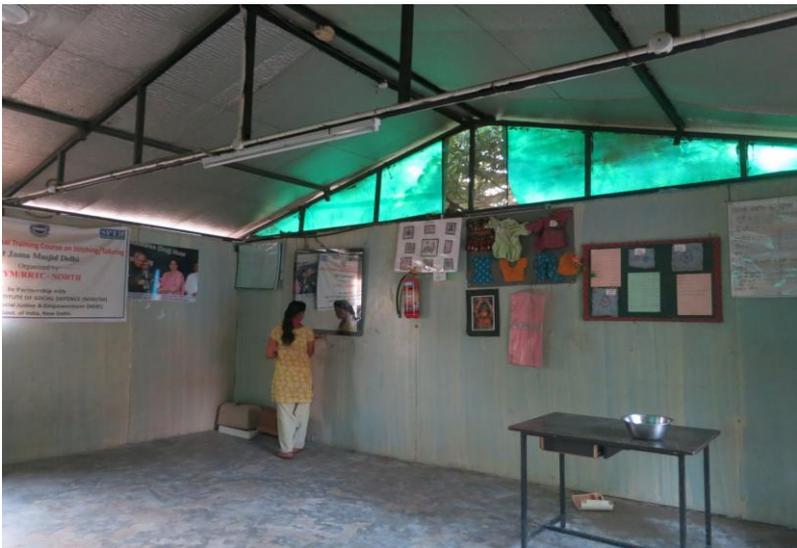


Jama Masjid, Old Delhi (Author's photo)

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A view of the women's shelter from the mosque (Author's photo)



Inside the shelter (Author's photo)