

## **Begging and Criminality\***

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On Wednesday August 8, the Delhi High Court decriminalized begging in the capital. In the course of its hearing it had raised the question how begging could be an offence in a country where the government was unable to provide food and jobs; its final verdict is in line with this thinking. Of course there was no central legislation, or legislation relating specifically to Delhi, that had criminalized begging earlier; but the capital region like several other states had simply used the provisions of the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act to treat begging as a criminal activity.

India's record in this regard even in the twenty-first century is worse than that of England in the seventeenth century where there had been a large increase in the incidence of begging, because of the impact of the process of primitive accumulation of capital. This process had occurred in several different ways, from the "Enclosure Movement" (where common land was simply enclosed and appropriated by the landlords which made petty production unviable and threw out lots of petty producers from their traditional activities) to massive inflation owing to the inflow of precious metals from the Americas (which lowered real wages and made the traditional ways of living impossible for many). Seventeenth century England had developed a dual system to cope with such increase in begging.

A distinction was drawn between those who were able-bodied and therefore could work but did not have jobs, and those, like the elderly and disabled, who were simply unable to work. For the former there were "work-houses" where they were provided with raw materials and made to work, while the latter were provided with relief in their places of residence by taxing those local residents who were "able to pay". It is estimated that by 1776 as many as 100000 paupers were housed in work-houses across England and Wales, and that, additionally, by the end of the century as many as a million persons were getting poverty relief at the local level. These two figures put together would amount perhaps to more than 10 percent of the total population of England and Wales at the time. This is a measure as much of the devastation caused by primitive accumulation of capital in the development of capitalism, as of the fact that such devastation was also accompanied by a measure of relief to the destitute even under developing capitalism in metropolitan economies.

In societies like ours however where the main instrument of primitive accumulation historically had been the colonial processes of "drain of wealth" and "deindustrialization", the millions that became destitute could get no relief of any kind. This was not only the root of modern mass poverty in our society, i.e. of poverty associated with insecurity and unrelated either to natural calamities or to the prevailing levels of labour productivity in society, but also the progenitor of large-scale begging even by able-bodied persons.

Post-independence capitalist development under the dirigiste regime made little impact on the levels of such destitution. Instead of carrying out any significant land redistribution which might have mitigated such destitution, it actually entailed evictions of share-croppers and tenants-at-will by landlords interested in taking to "junker"-style capitalist farming in the new context. In the neo-liberal era, primitive

accumulation of capital through the encroachment by the capitalist sector upon traditional petty production has got a huge fillip; and this has further enhanced the scale of destitution.

What is remarkable however is the virtually total absence of any system of relief for the destitute. In England, we have seen, there was some system of relief; indeed this relief was by no means insignificant, because of which in the nineteenth century there was a conscious effort to ensure that the conditions of life of those being offered relief (who belonged to the reserve army of labour) were kept “suitably” miserable, so that the wages of the workers being actually employed by capital could remain depressed. But in India no such relief for the destitute has been forthcoming.

This could be understandable under colonialism, for the colonial masters could scarcely care about the conditions of life of the “native” population; but the fact of the absence of any relief even in post-independence India is an intriguing phenomenon, which no doubt has to do with the utter unconcern about the poor on the part of the affluent segments of our society, an unconcern rooted perhaps in the inhuman system of caste-oppression that has existed for millennia.

It is against this background of unconcern that the introduction of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme by the UPA-I government under pressure from the Left upon whose support it depended in parliament, was such a remarkable development. It constituted perhaps the first attempt at introducing a system of relief for the poor and the destitute workers in rural India. But with UPA-II there was already a whittling down of the Scheme, which now has become so serious that for all practical purposes the Scheme has become inconsequential. Wage arrears have climbed so much that even the workers have lost interest in enrolling under the Scheme.

It is a symptom of the utterly ruthless system of exploitation that is developing in this country that even as income and wealth inequalities mount to unprecedented levels, even as the limited relief to the destitute that had been introduced is withdrawn, and even as the old are mocked with a monthly pension whose meagreness is unbelievable, the problem of destitution is sought to be swept under the carpet by criminalizing begging, despite the fact that no alternative support system for the destitute is put in place, of the sort that even bourgeois England had over three hundred years ago.

The idea is not to prevent begging by providing relief to the destitute, but to ensure that they do not “pollute” our cities by becoming visible. They are not only offered no means of survival, but even the most degrading mode of survival that is available to them, which is begging, is also denied to them, since it besmirches our city-scape. And since there is nothing to prevent every other state and city in the country from imitating the capital city’s criminalization of begging, the destitute literally have no place to go to. Even Tudor England had earmarked certain areas where begging had been allowed; twenty-first century India does not deign to do so, even as our establishment shouts from rooftops how we have overtaken China as the fastest-growing economy in the world.

It is ironical that one has to “welcome” the Delhi High Court verdict that decriminalizes begging in the capital. But a minimum essential condition for a

democracy which is supposed to embody the rule of a “fraternity of equal citizens”, is that such destitution must not exist. An essential condition for that is the enactment of a “right to employment” for everyone; and if the State fails to provide employment to anyone then that person must nonetheless be paid a living wage.

Being unemployed and destitute is not the fault of the individual. Since the individual is part of an entire social system from which he or she cannot opt out, the responsibility for his or her destitution lies with society. On its behalf the State that presides over this social system must provide every person with employment, or, in its absence, a wage nonetheless. This elementary logic must be drilled into our collective thinking.

To say that our current social arrangements do not permit this and hence this cannot be implemented amounts to an inversion of reason. It is not the people who have to adjust to the requirements of a social arrangement but the social arrangement which has to adjust to the requirements of the people. With democracy under a serious threat in the country at present, when the preoccupation is with its rescue and re-invigoration against the onslaught of the Hindutva forces, this is the appropriate time to place the right to employment on the political agenda, as an integral part of such an effort at re-invigoration.

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