Koshish: A Brief Note on Program Progress

Project Background and Description:

Over the years, TISS has amassed an extensive experience base on issues related to poverty, beggary and destitution, the criminal justice system and social development. TISS, through field action projects and fieldwork placements, has been involved in intervention at the Beggars’ Home in Mumbai, with the police, in various welfare institutions, and recently, directly with the homeless. TISS’s engagement with displacement and shelter issues is also longstanding.

To build on its engagement with socially excluded populations, TISS started a Field Action Project named Koshish in 2006 where it committed itself for the protection of the rights of the one of the most vulnerable population i.e. Destitute and shelter-less people criminalized under Beggary Prevention Legislation.

It aims at addressing the interrelated issues of beggary, destitution and homelessness through a combination of measures, pitched at the varying levels of providing support for basic and immediate needs, facilitating linkages to gainful and secure employment and advocacy for integration into the larger society. It also aims for the development of meaningful policy for securing rightful entitlements.

At the core of the project, lies the issue of homelessness. With various processes of ‘ill-planned’ planned development, lack of family support, acute illness or absolute poverty, poor people are forced into Destitution. The issues that such people face once out there in the unfamiliar and very often ‘hostile environment’ were largely the starting point for the conceptualization of this work.

There have been very serious linkages between destitution and beggary; both with helpless people getting into beggary as well as state punishing working poor on charges of beggary. People believe those who are into begging are making lot of money and they do it as choice and therefore, they deserve to be punished. However, this is based more on the popular notions that the society has about these people and in reality, these notions have very little
relevance. Unfortunately, people choose to go by what is convenient for them to believe, without bothering to know the reality.

Beggary Prevention Law was brought in place to check the issue of beggary. It aimed at prevention of beggary through training and rehabilitation of those who were involved into begging. However, the way beggary and beggar is defined in the act changes the whole document into very vulnerable and anti-poor document. Over the years, it has been largely the arrest and punishment part of the law that got implemented with training and rehabilitation program becoming either irrelevant or totally absent.

Since August 2006, Koshish had been working in Mumbai and had gained enough experience and understanding that could be used constructively to engage with broader advocacy and model-building work. With this aim, last year we extended our work to Delhi where we collaborated with Department of Social Welfare, Delhi Government.

The key objectives of the project are:

1. To reach out to the destitute and homeless population and to understand their psychological, social, economic, cultural contexts.
2. To engage with daily issues of survival, protection and growth thus addressing the immediate causes that may possibly lead to beggary.
3. To work with the population in custody under Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959 and assist in their reintegration with the family and society.
4. To mobilize the destitute and homeless population to participate in the process of rehabilitation.
5. To engage in advocacy for inclusive policy and programs securing rightful entitlements as citizens.

Strategies:

Project views its objectives as the primary responsibilities of the government. Efforts have been put to make government take up the responsibility and get into collaboration in the entire
process. Project is working very closely with the government machinery, thus, attempting to influence change from within and making the government accountable towards its people.

With our experiences in Mumbai and Delhi, we have realized that improved structures and arrangements for the betterment of people could be soundly ensured with active government participation. We directed our intervention broadly at advocacy with the government and other stakeholders for the repeal of the present legislation and greater degree of rights and entitlements for the Urban Poor especially homeless citizens. More direct programs were focused towards ensuring “Protection of Legal rights of Persons under BPBA, 1959” and Rehabilitation and Re-integration of Individual in the societal structure through various processes of capacity building. Some of the key features of functioning have been:

1. Reducing vulnerabilities through early intervention.
3. Linkages between sources and destination.
4. Linkages between homeless populations across cities.
5. Identifying role of specific Departments in the Government, e.g. Department of Social Welfare, Department of Women and Child Development, Social Justice and Empowerment, Health, etc and lobbying for their coordination.
7. Building Public opinion.
8. Policy influencing.
9. Networking and alliance building for sharing as well as policy advocacy.
10. Community Based Rehabilitation and Institutional placement.

Intervention towards the realization of above-mentioned objectives was directed towards two groups of the destitute population in Mumbai and Delhi– the homeless/ destitute people who live on the streets, and those who are housed in the Beggars’ Home.

We are successfully engaged with different processes owned by the government as part of our advocacy efforts while the work inside the institutions is mostly catering to the rehabilitation needs of persons in custody. Presently, we are working in 4 beggars’ home in Delhi and 2 homes in Mumbai. In addition, we have active engagement with the homeless persons
living on the streets, both in Mumbai and Delhi. Last year, we covered around 2500 people through various programs.

Some of the key programs have been as follows:

1. Advocacy: Koshish initiated a dialogue about the relevance of beggary law (BPBA, 1959) in today’s context and engaged positively with the governments seeking the repeal of the law. Both Maharashtra as well as Delhi governments has, in principle, agreed with the need of repeal of the law.

   At present, we are in the process to prepare the draft for alternative law that would replace current BPBA.

   We were included as part of following committees/processes as a result of our efforts;
   i. Member, Drafting Committee, set up by Delhi Government to prepare the draft of Alternative law to replace the current legislation.
   ii. Member, Screening Committee, for the selection of the NGO for running the Open Home. (We later resigned owing to the differences over the design of the scheme).
   iii. Member, Inspection Committee, set up by DUSIB to review the situation of shelters in Delhi.
   iv. Actively engaged with the Census process for the Homeless citizens.
   v. To take advocacy efforts to wider range of stake holders, we have regularly been doing ‘Sensitization Sessions’ with National Institute of Social Defense (Advisory Body to Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Union Government). Participants include Police Officers, NGO functionaries, Officials of Social Welfare and other departments from various states, law practitioners and representatives from Academic institutions from all over the country.

2. Alliances and Networks: We are part of the Networks on issues of Health & Mental Health, Food Security, Housing Rights and Urban Poverty.

   These alliances were being used for assistance in direct interventions as well as for Advocacy work. These are the groups of organizations that have come together to
provide services and demonstrate models with regard to the interventions concerning
the issues of Mental Health, Urban Poor, Food Rights etc.

3. **Calling Home (Home visits/ family tracing):** This program involves tracing the
family/relatives/employers etc through phone calls, postal communication and visits.
This is our very first step towards the rehabilitation of individuals in custodial homes.
Phone calls help us in tracing the families and subsequent release of the client. It also
helps the person to gain control over his annoyances and psychological exertions.
Whenever a person calls or interact with his family members most of the emotions
(both negatives and positive ones) gets ventilated thus helping him to cope with the
sadness and grief.

Home visits are made to their address for further facilitating the process of repatriation
and re-integration into the families and society at large. Other than getting the person
release, these visits enable us to build relation with the family which we successfully
used to sent back home even those clients who were away from their families for a
considerable long time.

As a part of the tracing process, we contact our network/alliance partners in other
states and we also take the help of the local police for the same mostly through phone
calls.
More than **1000 persons** were covered through this support.

4. **Medical Intervention:** Remarkable change in the overall medical environment within
the institution truly reflects the impact that Koshish has created. Earlier patients were
hardly taken out of the institution for treatment. This most often used to take days and
in cases of emergencies (which are quite frequent in beggars home, given the profile
of the population being brought there) it was mostly ‘quite late’.

But now regular referrals are made to various civic hospitals and clients are being
provided with required treatment. Timely treatment and referrals has helped greatly in
saving lives. Constant engagement with the staff members has also resulted in
increased involvement and interest from the Hospital and guarding staff in patient’s
care and well being.
More than 500 persons benefited from health intervention.

5. **‘My Space’-Finding Oneself:** This is the first step towards creating an environment of ‘freedom’ that would eventually lead to the rehabilitation and re-integration. This place allows its users to bring out hidden skills, talents without any fear of abuse or punishment. It also allows people to be ‘themselves’. The purpose of initiating this program in Beggar’s Home was to give people a sense of freedom while they are still in custody and at the same time, bring a routine in their otherwise static lives.

Through our “My Space” program, we tried to create a space which is independent of any restrictions or control on free expressions. This is a thought which hopefully will change the lives of many, especially those who have been in the institutions for longer period and therefore, have lived completely controlled life.

Through this program, we hope of creating special environment suiting to the needs of this group where hostile ‘lock ups or barracks’ will be replaced with ‘specially trained’ and friendly caretaker.

About 200 women benefited from this intervention.

6. **Economic Rehabilitation:** Koshish aims social and economic empowerment of the homeless group by providing alternate livelihood options, through capacity building initiatives and secure & stable shelter.

Process involves a cycle where a person is firstly prepared mentally to come out of begging and getting ready to work and earn livelihood. This is also the phase where one’s emotional stability is assessed and social skills are developed. This is then supplemented by these trainings with life skills which enable the clients to deal effectively with the challenges of everyday life and ready him/her for community based rehabilitation. **About 300 persons were supported through this particular program.**

i) **Mental Preparedness:** This is the first stage of the cycle after the person has been inducted into ‘My Space’. As begging becomes a way of life for many of those we work with, getting the person mentally prepared to give up begging and work
becomes very critical. No amount of training or capacity building would be relevant unless the person is willing and prepared mentally to change his way of living. This stage involves counselling, individual sessions on individual’s background, personality assessment and planning process.

ii) **Capacity Building through work skills and support thereafter:** Rehabilitation and reintegration are contingent on the creation of steady and adequate livelihood options. Vocational guidance and support activities focus on not only skills training and capacity building for regular employment, but also facilitation of linkages with the employment market. A multi-tiered approach is followed, addressing individual needs while exploring how training can deal with needs at the group level.

Skill based training unit has been set up inside Beggars Home. As it was not possible to set up arrangements for every kind of training, understanding has been built-up with other agencies offering vocational trainings.

iii) **Strengthening of the Employer’s collective:** Employer’s Collective has been constituted with dual purpose of defending the person in the court when charged with beggary and also to seek employment for the needy people. It’s a group of employers’ mostly from unorganized sector and some companies and factories as well, that has been brought together to provide placement and job opportunities to people who we get released from the institution or need to support otherwise from the street.

As part of this process only, we also educate such potential employers about how BPBA 1959 is used to criminalize poor people and they must not hesitate in supporting the person that worked for them or they knew in the event of him getting arrested. About **50 employers** are part of these Collectives and around **500 persons** were supported through this during last year.

Even though homeless clients face serious barriers like poor health, poverty, lack of skills and mental and physical disabilities, we believe that employment is crucial for successful transition from homelessness to a life of self reliance. We are constantly working towards expanding this group. Idea is to create as diverse group as possible
so that there is wide range of alternatives for the clients to choose from.

We took it up as one of the major strategy towards the protection of the rights of the homeless people and so far this group of employers who understand our philosophy, have proved to be a major stakeholder as far as economic stability is concerned. Thus we plan to continue to approach and network with potential employers from various trades.

7. **Release through Legal Aid:** Immediately after the arrest, person is brought to Receiving Centre to serve the remand period. This is the period when Social Investigation Report is prepared and produced in the court which assists in determination of what final order would be. This, therefore, became most crucial entry point from the view point of legal rights’ protection. It is during this period that we investigate, visit employers, families etc, interact with any possible lead and finally submit the Social investigation Report (SIR) to the court through the institution. These reports have played vital role in ensuring the release of large number of people and their legal rights were secured. More than 500 persons were extended Legal Aid benefits.

8. **Institutional Placement Program:** All possible attempts were made to reintegrate the clients with their families. However, there were situations when family no more remained an option for the client to return to. This could be for various reasons. In some cases, families were unwilling to accept them for whatever reasons; while in other, clients did not want to return to their families. Few cases did not have any family at all, while still others did not remember the details of the family so they could not be traced back. There were also instances of clients giving the address but we were unable to trace the family.

In such situations, institutional placement came up as an effective alternative, especially for women, unless the person was capable enough of independent living. So we did individual planning according to their specific needs (training, employment, temporary shelter, medical care etc) and shifted them in shelter homes or institutions catering to those needs. Though the institutions take the overall responsibility of the
client, we were required to support them for specific needs (medicines, travelling, training, provision of special diet, follow up).

**About 15 such cases were done.**

9. **Training with Police:** Police is one of the major stakeholders when it comes to addressing the issues faced by the homeless and destitute citizens. In order to secure the most positive handling of the people while the anti-poor law still remains, we did trainings for the Inspectors and Head Constables in collaboration with Mumbai Police. These trainings were divided as per the zones in the city and we covered about **450 police officers** through these trainings.

10. **Training of Staff:** Orientation workshops were organized for the Superintendents, Welfare Officers and Probations Officers from all beggars home and courts attached with Beggar’s Act (Delhi) and 2 Homes in Mumbai. These workshops were on the ‘Possibilities of Rehabilitation of Residents within the Current Framework of Law’. These trainings turned out to be quite relevant and created significant impact on how the cases were handled by the authorities. About **25 officers** were covered through this.

11. **Training of Residents with Life Skills:** As part of this, several sessions were done where along with talks on need to work, life of dignity, taking personal responsibility etc, FDGs were carried out with the residents from all these homes; taking their views on Beggary law and what are their expectations from the government. This was utilized as a platform for these people to express themselves and also to ventilate their thoughts; which otherwise is difficult to do. During these FDGs people were freely expressing their aspirations and also what they feel about the law. A more confident and assured side of these people was brought out through these sessions. About **300 persons** participated in these sessions over a period of time.

12. **Research and Studies:** We completed 2 assessment reports and two research studies are currently going on. First was the Assessment report on the status of the Shelters. This assessment was done on the request of ‘Special Empowered Committee for the Homeless’ and Social Welfare Department to determine the reasons for under-utilization of existing shelters.
Second report is the compilation of the cases that we represented in the court through our Social Investigation Report. Most of these people were released based on our report and social assessment. We revisited about 80 of them to see how many of them were still out of begging.

We also did a Qualitative Study based in Bangalore. This study titled ‘Begging: A preferred way of living or sheer necessity to survive’- An Explorative Study on the Phenomenon of Destitution’ was to examine whether or not people resort to begging when all other mechanisms/ systems that help them survive, collapse.

We are presently doing this study in Mumbai and Delhi and also plan to do similar studies in few more cities to build on the findings of the study. This will help us build strong case to advocate for the repeal of beggary prevention legislations throughout the country.

13. Recreation and Cultural Activities: As a part of our efforts towards improving the conditions inside these institutions, activities like sports, street plays, drawing etc. were used as a regular program. These activities introduce a sense of freedom among people while in custody and also enabled them to explore and express themselves in better ways. These recreation sessions were conducted on a regular basis for the very purpose of preventing people from stagnation in their lives while living in custody. Also, this helped significantly in checking the aggression and unrest of the care taking staff which ultimately helped in checking the incidents of custodial violence.

Given the depressing environment that the institution has and also the abusive background that most of our client group comes from, it became critical to break the sadness and hopelessness of the institution. All these activities were intended to facilitate client’s social skills and repair the emotional strains that he or she may have suffered. This helped them to experience a positive environment in which they could express themselves, leading to a speedy recovery. About 200 people were part of these activities on a regular basis.
14. **Winter Rescue Program:** Delhi meets severe winters where every year large number of people dies due to the cold. We ran a special ‘Winter Rescue Operation’ where the core aim was to prevent deaths due to cold. Every day we would patrol on the streets, covering people with blankets or other warm clothing, attending to any medical emergency, informing them about ‘night-shelters’ and also reporting any incidence of abuse or destitution to appropriate authorities. **We ran this program for 3 months of severe cold i.e. December to February, apart from regular weekly night outs.**

15. **Community Mobilization:** One of the most serious problems associated with homelessness is unstable living patterns and associated difficulties such as the lack of access to shelter and washing facilities, inability to save financial resources, and harassment by the police. These living conditions also negatively influence the general public’s perceptions of the homeless. One of the key reasons for this is that the homeless community itself is highly unorganized and it was crucial for them to come together and seek for their rights themselves.

This involved reaching out to the destitute and homeless in the city, primarily at night time, at locations where they gathered for rest. Efforts were made to identify groups of destitute people as well as those who stay alone. Night-outs have been the starting point of engagement with the homeless. These rounds on the streets helped not only in developing an understanding about the homeless population but also helped in identifying and responding to basic needs such as forced arrests, lack of food, medical emergencies etc, eventually resulting in mobilization of these people.

We were able to bring together about **60 families and similar number of individuals** through these efforts.

16. **Towards Citizenship Rights:** One of the major problems that lie within this group is that of lack of an identity document. One of the identity cards that we managed to get for them was from the Sulabh International Toilets. This led to preventing arrests of the people and also provided them with some sense of security and protection from suspicion from the police. More than **100 such passes** were issued.
Based on this experience, we moved towards securing official documents of citizenship.

Substantive work that was done in this aspect was to facilitate the process of getting them a birth certificate. Recognizing the need for an identity for the children of our homeless groups, we took it on us to work with the BMC and get Birth certificate issued for children whose parents have a birth proof. **We got Birth Certificates for 30 children.**

Another crucial document that we could get for the Homeless families was the Ration Card. With the help from our network partners, we were able to secure **Ration Cards for 15 Homeless families while papers are ‘under-process’ for another 30 families.**

17. **Process Documentation:** This is the population that is largely seen as unproductive and difficult to work with. Not many interventions have been attempted with this group, largely because of this notion of non-productivity only. Experience has been that it is the extended period of support that this group needs as compared to any other settled group of persons as the capacity to adjust is lesser, learning is slower and abuse has been far more devastating and traumatizing. It, though, undoubtedly, remains a challenging profile of people to work with.

The project has clearly demonstrated how effective rehabilitation can be achieved. Through this intervention we have shown that if serious and constant efforts are made with adequate individual planning after assessing one’s background, strength and personality, chances for stable rehabilitation grow manifold.

Our cycle of rehabilitation with broad approach of ‘mental preparedness- capacity building- reintegration’ along with its several minute components is one that can be the base for several other interventions to be modelled upon. Therefore, we began the process of documenting the intervention in a structured manner.

Process documentation of the entire program through which we have successfully ensured the rehabilitation of large number of people will enable us to take our model at much broader level with greater reach out. The hands-on experience of all these years would serve as strong advocacy tool.
**Action Strategy and Implementation Mechanisms**

It was expected that the activities of Koshish will constantly evolve according to the emerging needs of the destitute and homeless population; therefore, the efforts were to maintain flexibility in activities and program components. The details of program activities were charted out on a biannual basis to ensure that the program remained relevant to the felt needs of the target population and was effective in meeting the larger goals and objectives.

**Limitations:**

a) Various dynamics within the staff at Beggars Home had its impact on project work.

b) Since we worked very closely with the government institutions, impact of government decision’s like transfer of certain officers, appointment of new officers or certain office being kept vacant, had an impact on our intervention as well.

c) Individuals we work with have gone through severe trauma and abuse and as such, certain cases took very long to respond, thus, impacting the over-all process as well.

d) Aspirations of people vary to the extremes and it did serve as a limitation.

e) Drop-out rate of people falling out of job after getting placed was relatively higher in comparison to other disadvantaged groups.