Street named ‘home’
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In the city of dreams, Mumbai, the Pardhi community's search for a “valid” identity and basic necessities of life continues.

Alongside its innumerable stories of success, prosperity and grandeur, Mumbai is also host to communities that live in abysmal conditions and whose existence is a struggle in itself. The Pardhis are one such community that scrape through the city’s underbelly.

A recent study found that more than 50 per cent of the Pardhis enclaves existed in conditions of abject homelessness with the families residing on the city’s footpath, beaches and railway tracks with negligible access to water, electricity, sanitation, health and education facilities, eking out a living “virtually as non-citizens”.

The report, prepared by Mayank Sinha and Paankhi Agrawal associated with the Centre for Criminology and Justice at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), enumerates 1,018 Pardhi households settled in 31 enclaves spread across the city.

Compounding their residential woes is the city’s Slum Rehabilitation Policy that legalises only those citizens as residents of the city who can provide documentary proof that they have been living in their current dwelling structures before January, 1995.

“Few Pardhi families who have lived in the city before January 1995 have proof of residence of a particular dwelling structure as the dominant occupation among them has been manual labour (the occupation more than 57 per cent of the Pardhis surveyed) in construction industry, which compels them to keep moving,” said Mr. Sinha.

A Pardhi daily wage labourer earns anywhere between Rs 100 to Rs 150 per day for a minimum nine hours of work. A female worker is paid even lower. Besides low remuneration, there was always an element of uncertainty and irregularity associated with wage-payment, says the report.

It also notes the community’s susceptibility to many work related injuries owing to the strenuous nature of their manual work. It says that workers engaged in gutter de-siltation are severely prone to water and vector borne diseases. This in turn kicks off a vicious cycle commencing with a loss of working days that cause a severe strain on the family budget, states the report.

The demand for Pardhi labourers by the municipality for gutter desiltation work has reduced over the years due to adoption of machines, prompting workers to resort to employment through a contractor and middleman, known in common parlance as a mukkadum, who usually retains 8-10 per cent of the wage received by the worker.

Since most of the Pardhi families engage in hawking at public places, there is always a threat of their wares being confiscated by the municipal corporation authorities.

The report highlights the chronic insecurity hanging the community lives in with 85 per cent of the families not attached to the formal banking system. Of the 2,668 Pardhi adults surveyed, there were only 10 persons who could claim to have a steady and salaried employment.
It notes the factors debilitating the community’s progress, namely illiteracy, lack of availability of sufficient credit to finance vocational training and purchase of fixed and floating capital. For instance, some of the Pardhis who had learnt to drive failed to secure employment with the State transport services because they were either inadequately educated or because of the extra-legal charges demanded by the brokers.

The study points to rampant red-tapism that makes it extremely tough for the community to obtain vital documents like a voting card, ration card or caste certificate. The report underscores the high prevalence of child labour.

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