

Working Paper Number 86**A Note On Destitution**

Barbara Harriss-White*

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In this paper the economic, social and political dimensions of destitution are analysed. Economic destitution is seen as a contradiction in terms since destitute people survive without assets and income. Social destitution is a process of expulsion and of the denial of dependent status. The state plays an active political role in creating and perpetuating destitution. Next, destitution is mapped onto other paradigms of poverty. Finally responses outside and inside political economy are outlined. Case material is drawn from India.

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* Queen Elizabeth House, University of Oxford

'Political economy does not recognise the unoccupied worker.. The beggar, the unemployed, the starving [and] the destitute are figures which exist not for it, but only for the eyes of doctors, judges, gravediggers and beadles. Nebulous.. figures which do not belong within the province of political economy' (Marx)

The poorest of the poor are sometimes referred to as destitute. How are we to understand the condition of destitution, to map it against other dimensions of poverty, to make it less nebulous and admit it to political economy? This note is a first attempt. ¹ Since destitution is an economic, social and political phenomenon, each aspect will be examined in turn.

Economic aspects of destitution

It is useful to begin with insights from development economics. Here, destitution is a twofold kind of deprivation in the 'space' of income or monetary poverty. It involves the absence of any control over assets and the loss of access to income from one's own labour. As a state, it is a contradiction in terms because the complete absence of assets and income spells death. There would be no such thing as long-term destitution. The specification of medium- or long-term destitution then has to involve a value judgement of what might constitute a 'nearly complete absence'. One accepted measure is 'a quarter of median rural income',² but in fact this threshold is quite arbitrary. It is a convenience for statistical treatment.

These economic definitions allude to a process of loss, one which deprives a person of control over assets and income. While loss of assets leads to loss of income from rent or production, loss of income may also be a labour-market phenomenon resulting from the denial or the unavailability of wage work. What deprives people of their control over assets and labour? Economists have focussed on hysteresis phenomena - sequences of events in which losses of certain crucial assets are triggered which act as a ratchet and trigger other losses in turn, after which things can never return to what they were before. Such events include accidents, profligacy (addictions) and 'natural' disasters as well as health deprivation in the 'space' of capabilities; they are accompanied by debt. People are pitched into increasingly continuous periods with increasingly less assets. The detail of this process of destitution, which is also known as 'coping' or 'survival' is known to vary depending on the quality, lumpiness and complementarity of assets, the timing and the terms of trade of their dispossession, their gendered ownership and their implications for a person's capabilities. A

¹ The primary field material introduced in this note was obtained from one field visit to a settlement of beggars in rural Chhattisgarh State and a second to a variety of kinds of homeless people on the streets of New Delhi at night organised by ActionAid, India, in January 2002. See B. Harriss-White, 2002, *Report of a Visit to see the Work of ActionAid in India*, Action Aid, London

²T. Hyat, 1999, 'Appendix: Definition of Destitution' unpublished research, Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford

plausible common sequence involves the progressive liquidation of small stock, livestock, consumer goods and eventually the failure to protect from sale the key productive assets, female assets (gold and other moveable collateral) before male assets (land).

Destitution is being conceived of here as an *individual* phenomenon because by the time a person is destitute they are usually an individuated remnant of a collapsed household.³ But the process also requires the loss of insurance mechanisms - notably savings and credit - with which the members of a household (or a social unit larger than a household) protect themselves from these ratcheting events or shocks to consumption. Insurance may be lost by a change (increase) in the risk of shocks, by a run of uncertain events, by exclusion from a process of rationing both of the means of insurance and the beneficiaries of it, or by the imposition of constraints on the use of specific assets to smooth income or consumption.⁴ The process of loss of insurance may itself be sequenced - one such sequence would involve a loss of access to non-productive precautionary savings, loss of access to reciprocal, interest-free borrowing, loss of access to commercial loans at interest, loss of access to high interest money lenders, exhaustion of productive precautionary savings and reduction to a state of extreme vulnerability.

Turning to the process of loss of control over one's labour, two aspects are important. In one, tactics are deployed by others to force unemployment, for example by preventing entry. The existence of socially regulated wages above a theoretical clearing wage will prevent everyone from being employed. There are specific social rules which determine the particular people who are debarred.⁵ Physical condition, being malnourished or disabled may lead to an exclusion which becomes self-reinforcing. The second aspect of the loss of control is a culmination of what Sen has called "unfair inclusion" rather than exclusion".⁶ Forms of labour exploitation become increasingly threatening to the subsistence of labour and so to its day to day reproduction. In the end, the right to the asset of one's own labour may be forfeited. This right may be sold (bonded) to others. The concept of dependence may be transformed and the labour of non-labouring dependents sold or bonded. The most extreme tactics do not involve the sale of labour so much as the marketing of the body itself (as in the sale of blood or of organs or the renting of the body, as in sex work).

³ Anthropological field research shows that this not always so, see the work of James Staples on the organisation of begging in and from Andhra Pradesh, 2002, 'The Body in Society' unpublished chapter of a doctoral dissertation, SOAS, London

⁴T. Hyat, 1999, 'The definition of destitution' and 'The process of deprivation' unpublished notes for doctoral thesis, Oxford University ; taimur.hyat@sant.ox.ac.uk

⁵ Caste, gender and age can be used to bar people from certain kinds of work.

⁶A.K. Sen, 2001, 'Exclusion and Inclusion' *Mainstream*, Nov 28th [p2 on South Asia Citizens Wire: <http://www.mnet.fr/aiindex>, Nov 28th 2001]

Social aspects of destitution

It has already become evident that destitution is not simply an outcome of market exchange or 'market failures' to be measured in the monetary domain, it is also the loss of enfranchisement or entitlements which are not price-mediated, the collapse of moral units above the level of the individual, the draining away of social support, loss of access to 'common' property and public goods and services, the disappearance of political legitimacy and citizenship i.e. the violation of political rights. Categories of people are recognised as unworthy of exercising social claims and therefore rejected from relationships of accountability. Rather than being passively socially excluded (from a vector of entitlements from which the vast bulk of the population are also excluded ⁷) they are actively socially *expelled*. No less than for assets and labour we have to ask what triggers such losses in customary and moral worth, such extraordinary transformations of social and political status and such a extreme violation of political, economic and social rights.

The transgression of norms of inclusion - of pure, clean practices, healthy states, normal sexuality and compliant behaviour - will be one kind of trigger for social expulsion. These moral regulations have varying plasticity. They will be specific to castes, to religions, genders and places. As social constructs, they are contested and can be changed. Belonging to a scheduled caste/ scheduled tribe, being old and disabled is a condition of multiple disadvantage but not a sufficient condition for destitution. The departure or death of those whose duty is to support, or their failure to support through dispute, physical inability and incapacity, ⁸ or their neglect or abuse of the obligation to support, may be other triggers. Change to the body is certainly a third. The latter may in turn take several forms. The neglect of actual or perceived or symbolic cleanliness (as in addiction); deformity or disability; signs and symptoms of certain kinds of disease, mental illness or psychological state; even outward signs of malnutrition or starvation may precipitate disenfranchisement. The process of expulsion involves forcible physical exclusion from the space of a moral unit like a caste or a village. The Hindi word for poverty - *daridhratha* - means 'roving' and implies the breakdown of 'community'. ⁹ It may take the form of uncompensated and unpunished violence to persons, at the extreme (as in the waves of fascistic communal violence in 2002) seizure of assets or the complete destruction of property. This expulsion is deemed justifiable and legitimate by those practising it.

However it also must not be forgotten that expulsion from moral and political society, and exclusion from work or from social protection derived from work or from the preconditions for the day to day

⁷R. Saith, C Ruggeri-Laderchi and F. Stewart, 2002, 'Poverty : alternative realities, an overview' paper to the NCAER Workshop on Alternative Conceptualisations of Poverty, April 2002; R. Saith, 2001, 'Social Exclusion' www.qeh.ox.ac.uk; Working Paper Series

⁸ Work-related accidents and disease is a major cause of adult disability (S. Erb and B. Harriss-White, 2002, *Outcast from Social Welfare: Adult disability and Incapacity in Rural South India* Bangalore, Books for Change)

⁹G.M. Gopal, 2001, 'The Challenge of ending Poverty in India: Towards a new Approach' draft paper to the National Commission for the Review of the Working of the Constitution' (NCAER, New Delhi)

reproduction of the body or from citizenship are some of the many conditions necessary for the accumulation of wealth by others. It is in this sense that destitution enters political economy. It is not simply that the technical requirements for labour processes require some kinds of bodies to be denied access (and with labour displacing growth characteristic of the last decade it is entirely to be expected that reformulations of the eligibility of the body for labour markets will appear). It is not simply that revenue for social sector spending is simultaneously squeezed and thus eligibility for social protection by the state will need to be restricted.¹⁰ It is also that exclusion from exploitation is based on cultural criteria. The latter entitle society actively to practice oppression and that the state is complicit in this process. We return to this theme a little later.

The state: criminalised poverty and law-induced destitution

Destitution is not simply a serious condition of extreme deprivation, illegitimacy and/or invisibility before the state. It is also a hard matter of criminalising law. The laws affecting destitution exacerbate it. Under certain conditions (for example those under which state-planned, development-induced displacement or state-backed, corporate displacement fail to compensate or rehabilitate evicted people) law may actively cause destitution - both in its letter and in its practice.¹¹ Vagrancy is a crime. Beggary must be 'prevented' under the Act with that name. The state varies greatly in its complicity with beggary. It appears to be most complicit in rural areas and small towns and most intolerant in metropolitan cities. The occupations of destitute people are criminalised - not simply sex-work, courtering and peddling drugs but even mobile trading and squatter trading. An unregistered trading site and the erection of shelter are prosecutable under planning laws, pedestrians' rights and in terms of public nuisance and trespass.¹² Certain kinds of addiction and self-predation are illegal. Children in need of care and protection, and children in conflict with the law and child labour fall under the jurisdiction of the judiciary and police.

The enforcement of these laws (Sections 109 and 151 of the Criminal Procedure Code, 1973) involves the removal and incarceration of such people. Lack of assets, access to law and/or literacy means many fail to secure bail or redress through the courts. Upon release, those not destitute beforehand are destitute after indeterminate periods of detention. Targets of preventive detention set for the police require the regular rounding up of homeless and destitute people. The threat of eviction or detention for long periods creates incentives for collusive relations of avoidance involving pay-offs. Institutionalised relations of extortion increase the costs of destitution. These transactions are accompanied by violence. Beating is allowed in law upon apprehension of criminality, and sexual violence on the part of the police is far from being unknown.

¹⁰ M. Russell and R Malhotra, 2001, 'Capitalism and Disability' pp 211-228 in (eds) L. Panitch and C. Leys 'A World of Contradictions' *Socialist Register 2002*. London, Merlin

¹¹ R. Sharma, 2002, 'Aftershocks: The Rough Guide to Democracy' VHS PAL 66 min actindia@vsnl.com

¹²The pincer of urban land rents and planning laws mean that poor people are prevented from renting or investing in shelter.

Recent changes to these laws increase the formal powers of police with respect to destitute people. The Juvenile Justice Act for example covers children in need of care and protection and children in conflict with the law. The first category includes street children, child labourers (waiters, garage hands etc) orphans, beggars' and sex workers' children; the latter category consists of criminal offenders or children framed for criminal offences. The Act was altered in 2000 after consultation with activists (which ensures that the current act will be very difficult to amend in future). The upper age of children covered has been increased from 16 to 18, the role of the police enhanced and the destination of preference is segregated institutions. In practice, the older teenagers are harassing younger children; police have institutionalised relations of extortion with juveniles on the streets and part of their operating budgets varies directly with the number of juvenile offences recorded, giving them incentives to harass children. States like Chhattisgarh, already under pressure to reduce and offload social sector spending, are withdrawing from the provision of social security and are eager to have their institutions privately run.

The obligation of the state to provide shelter is observed in the breach. A mere Rs 1 crore (£150,000/ \$250,000)¹³ has been allocated to cater for the needs of homeless people throughout India. In New Delhi there are 14 night shelters providing floors or sleeping benches for an estimated 5.6% of the homeless.¹⁴ In one such, up to 400 men bed down in lines on mats for Rs 6. There is little provision possible for storing belongings. There appeared to be one tap; and showers and latrines were in a foul state of maintenance. Lights are kept blazing to prevent conditions conducive to sexual abuse. 'Butterflies' is a grim room for some 50 children, also sleeping in the same conditions of surveillance. Some children store personal belongings in metal trunks. A second shelter, erected after some agitation by workers, is a flimsy temporary tent of polythene and bamboo with no lighting. The Corporation acts as if it needs actively to repel this *workforce* and shelters are being *closed*.¹⁵

Social responses to destitution are contradictory. On the one hand society follows and develops the assumptions in the law as it is practised. The selective violation of rights is sanctioned by society. It initiates social expulsion, practises notions of justice involving 'stigma' which permit harsh oppressive treatment outside the law. It condones unpunished illegal extortion, mob justice and the reinforcement of exclusion. It gives a customary licence to harass (including sexually), to abuse, thieve from, be violent towards, push to impure space and not to come to the aid of destitute people. The suspected abuse of entry barriers to accepted and institutionalised kinds of dependence such as religious/yogic begging, public suspicion of deliberate injury or faked disability, and of the deliberate organisation of child beggars by beggar-magnates are comparatively benign devices commonly used to withhold nurture from destitute people.¹⁶ The justification for such behaviour also

¹³ Less than 0.000,000.1% of GDP

¹⁴S. Menon 2001 'Workers who shelter on the Pavement' *Labour File 7, 6-7 pp 5-13*

¹⁵ The number of shelters has been reduced from 19 to 14 in two years. I.P, Singh 2001 'Government Policy is Silent on Pavement Workers' *Labour File 7,6-7, pp34-36*

¹⁶S.K. Jha 'The Beggars of Kathmandu' *The Kathmandu Post* (25th February, 2002)

involves the fear of criminality - particularly of theft and of the consequences of addiction. It involves views on 'idleness' and its lack of worth, the stigmatisation of occupations as physically dirty, anti-social and illegal (drugs); and notions of ugliness and of destitution as a challenge to modernity.

On the other hand norms of pity, belief in 'divine credit',¹⁷ charity and kindness motivate selective transfers to destitute people (for example by rice millers, petty traders, meals hotels and ticket collectors). The deserving destitute are the old, young, widows, the sick and disabled; the undeserving destitute are working-age addicts, sex workers and the masses of unskilled migrant casual wage labour necessary to the working of the urban economy. The economy of charity fluctuates seasonally due to changes to norms of generosity at the major festivals of each religion. In this pitting of contradictory social forces, the rare but radical assertions of justice for destitute groups must not be overlooked. Movements exist for social restitution and empowerment and for the re-inclusion of disempowered people into the pool of claimants from the state.

It is evident that the exclusivity of the law assuages deep fears of flows of migrant destitute people, protects the economic interests manifest in such fear and prevents the state from providing support to the destitute. In so doing, the state ensures that some categories of people are expendable and expended.

Having and being almost nothing - some distinctions

Having retrieved the concept of destitution for political economy, it becomes possible to map it onto paradigms of poverty. Other aspects of poverty overlap with destitution in complex ways.

Income poverty: Although Marx distinguished the 'destitute' from those malnourished, unemployed and begging, he lumped them together as 'unoccupied'. However, since long term destitution is a contradiction in terms, not all destitute people who survive are unoccupied. The most common occupation is beggary. Even though not all beggars are destitute, most destitute people beg. Begging is often the only option for destitute elderly and disabled people, orphaned and abused children, dependents of interned people, those who are mentally ill, people whose sexuality is deemed unacceptable by society, those affected by having had leprosy or having AIDS and addicts. Begging is a negotiated exchange somewhere between a gift proper and a market transaction involving a transient relationship of obligation of giver to receiver in which the beggar has power derived from 'coercive subordination'.¹⁸ Transfers are often in kind rather than cash.

Destitution may also result from the loss of rights to *dependent* status. Many former dependents are pitched into self predatory work. Women in such a position are commonly thought to be forced into sex work. This brings with it a new dependence upon the pimps who 'rescue' them from homelessness and destitution. Mentally ill vagrants have lost dependent status. So have street

¹⁷Kamat, op cit.

¹⁸ J. Staples, 2002, op.cit..That societies have strict rules about the acceptability of begging can be deduced from the behaviour of non-government organisations, increasingly corporatised and competitive, which rely on a form of institutionalised and intermediated beggary called 'fund raising'.

children and elderly beggars.¹⁹

Capability poverty: not being able to be sheltered, nourished, educated or supported : Lack of support will result from the absence of support as well as the loss of rights to it. The absence of support shows up in individuated or collapsed households . These are unusual forms of household in India. NCAER/UNDP data for 33,000 rural households in 1993-4 show that just 1.4% of households are individuated - in which a single person lives without immediate physical and social support.²⁰ Not all collapsed households are destitute in terms of assets and income : 17 % of such households are income poor - below the poverty line - compared with 35% nationwide. By contrast, in a rural hamlet of scheduled caste people living with leprosy in Chhattisgarh state in 2002, one third of households were single member and all lived in extreme income poverty and moderate to severe malnutrition.²¹

Capability dimensions other than being sheltered are hardly ever considered in relation to the condition of destitution. The All-India data for single member households reveals that they are surprisingly deprived in the capability dimensions of education and health.²² While 58% of all rural households are capability poor, 86% of those in single member households fall into this category.

Homeless people form another category of those most severely capability-deprived. In New Delhi 56% of homeless people are also deprived in education, and illiterate.²³ Not all homeless are destitute but many destitute people are homeless. Many are forced to migrate to urban areas where the moral economy is thought to operate according to different, restricted rules. It is in urban areas that destitute people become visible to elites. What does the condition of not having shelter disable people from being and doing? It does not prevent them from working. Homeless migrant male workers live from casual, de-skilled, (sometimes physically very punishing) labour at unregulated wages in order to remit money.²⁴ They are forced into homelessness in order to protect their access to work - by the absence of cheap lodging close to the site of their work or the need to prevent the theft of their equipment. Not having shelter means having no address. Not having an address

¹⁹ One investigation into homeless women found that almost all were mentally ill. Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan , 2001, *The Capital's Homeless* , New Delhi, AAA, p33

²⁰In fact it is not known if destitute people were included in the sample survey.

²¹ Field visit with ActionAid, January 2002.

²² This analysis is Ruhi Saith's, to whom I am grateful. Capability poverty is defined by poverty in either the education space or the health space. Education poverty in individuated households where the minimum age is 18 is defined as *illiteracy*. Health poverty is in terms of reported *chronic illness*.

²³ AAA, op.cit., p27

²⁴ According to AAA, 90% of homeless men in New Delhi do such work, 70% of whom are paid under the Minimum Wage (AAA, op.cit. , p29).

disentitles people from ration/identity cards which deprives them from eligibility to elementary food security and social protection, and from establishing savings accounts. In turn, this capability deprivation threatens the physical security of their savings.

Not a state of not functioning : social expulsion, exclusion and survival: Destitute people have been socially expelled, they have had economic assets and livelihoods, social status and support and political entitlements shorn from them. But, just as there is a lag of some two months between complete starvation and death, so destitute people survive variable lengths of time before death in conditions of social exclusion. In surviving, people often construct new social relations.

The loss of access to public goods and services means that the capability set of destitute people does not include being clean, having clean clothes or a change of clothes, being able to wash or defecate - either privately or in public spaces given over to such purposes.²⁵ Public lavatories are poorly maintained and not affordable. It may even be difficult to find drinking water, let alone food. Of course this does not mean that destitute people do not desire personal cleanliness as a functioning. Destitute people search for common property resources to which they may gain access and which may 'capacitate' them. In urban areas, these may be temples, churches, railways and bus stations though the terms of access may be unreliable and arbitrary, and eviction and expulsion often practised. They are forced to occupy physically and socially hazardous spaces, for example by polluted water bodies and garbage dumps. Or, as in the case of people living with the disabilities of having had leprosy, they make socially and physically isolated settlements - 'leper colonies'. Those who 'rove' have no sites to store possessions and no security for what they possess save that provided by their person.

Destitute people have lost the social relations by means of which potential capability is converted to actual functioning (relations which have been neglected in applied research on capabilities and functioning). Yet dependence and solidarity, being and doing, can be reconstituted. The gender division of labour may be changed, most notably when men find water and cook. Although homeless people are rarely female, quasi-families may be created, as when elderly women beggars attempt to care for street children. Street children develop strong bonds with one another.²⁶ Homeless migrant workers form work-gangs; beggars work in groups which will then develop regulative rules. Groups may refuse to share individual takings, at the same time as they pay a member not to beg but to protect possessions (such as cooking vessels and stoves). Beggars in rural Chhattisgarh have organised routes and territories, particular attire²⁷ and ways of presenting themselves.

²⁵H. Mander, 2002, *Forgotten Lives: Public Policy and Poor People in India* New Delhi, ActionAid

²⁶ An estimated 4% of homeless people in new Delhi are women - see AAA, 2001, p ix, p25.

²⁷People who beg in the name of religion have to grow a beard, wear saffron clothes and ash. The fortune teller wears peacock feathers and make up.. The transvestites ... have altogether

Institutionalised indignity does not necessarily denote lack of self esteem. Beggars may have pride in their resourcefulness, physical stamina and capacity to fend for dependents - if they have any.²⁸ Others have stories explaining their origin, the cause of their condition and their worth. Begging has entry barriers. Further, caste rules of commensality and proscriptions of intermarriage survive assets and income disentanglement. Beggars and homeless people may organise protection in order to sleep, particularly in the larger towns and cities where savings and possessions are at risk of theft. In Delhi public spaces (pavements and parks) are privatised at night by *thiyawalahs* or 'bedlords' who erect protective barriers, lay out beds which they rent - along with bedding - and pay off the police.

Survival requires income or transfers of food, clothing and medicine. Destitute people get these resources from begging, from types of labour which are rejected by the casual wage labour force (very heavy, defiling and dirty work) from access to new common property resources (waste from meals hotels), theft²⁹ and work in the illegal distribution of legal and illegal goods, notably drugs. In both rural and urban areas destitute people are commonly addicted to alcohol, solvents, narcotics or (hard) drugs. Addictions are distinctively costly items of expenditure for people already in severest poverty, and physically destructive therapies for intolerable conditions. While addiction compromises health, both violence and theft are limited by the physical weakness of excluded people. In the case of a settlement of leprosy-affected beggars, all disintegrated in their villages of origin, although the general pooling of resources from begging was avoided, very small scale caste-specific credit and insurance institutions had been created. Housing (hovels) was in rationed supply but a combination of the insultingly inadequate state pension and proceeds of begging enabled households with healthier members to accumulate the possessions of abject poverty.³⁰

different yet distinct style. .. The beggars who use animals for fund raising have to decorate their pets too.' K.L. Kamat, 1979/updated 1999 ' *The Begging Profession*' <http://www.kamat.com/kalranga/bhiksha/begging.htm>

²⁸ H. Mander, 2001, *Unheard Voices: Stories of Forgotten Lives* New Delhi, Penguin

²⁹ Research on homeless people emphasises, however, that their criminality is more often than not in the eye of the beholder.

³⁰ Deeparapara is a scheduled caste settlement with a well and a water pump. They are reckoned by caste lepers in the main village of Premnagar to be nicely segregated here. They live in tiny houses - upwards of unventilated and unlit rooms, all of 6ft by 7ft, in which there is a mud stove, earthenware or plastic water pots, a bed, one or two shelves for utensils and for bottles and tins of oil, lentils and salt, lines strung out for clothes, bandages, shawls and blankets, and bundles of firewood looped up to the rafters supporting the tiled roof. These glorified cupboards become hellish ovens in summer. They have been slowly and painfully constructed and repaired with remittances, and with the returns from begging and work. The street is clean and magnificently paved, courtesy of the state. Many of the adults of Deeparapara are severely malnourished.

To sum up, destitution is an extreme condition of monetary poverty; destitute people have been socially expelled; most destitute people are deprived in capability dimensions of poverty too. So there is a high probability that those deprived in all dimensions will be destitute. The state plays an active role in the process of destitution. The process is therefore very hard to reverse but a small minority manage to retreat from destitution to achieve 'monetary' poverty.

Responses outside political economy?

Let us begin with Marx's examples of those for whom destitute people exist - meaning that they are visible and cannot be avoided. Very little is known. 'Doctors' in Government hospitals have been observed to refuse and delay treatment. Such practices reinforce the process of expulsion and of denial of rights.³¹ 'Judges' - magistrates - are reported as generally satisfied that preventive detention is indeed in the interest of public order and, in enforcing the law, they support the private interests of the police. 'Beadles' (local police) have a predatory and violent 'rent-seeking' relationship with destitute people. And the 'gravediggers' - at least in Delhi - are under allegation of having dumped a body in a drain. Unclaimed bodies are supposed to be reported to the Police and disposed of by local authorities. In New Delhi in 2001, 84% of such bodies were of beggars.³² So destitute people are not 'nebulous' as Marx wrote. Instead they are the object of institutionalised social hostility.

Responses inside political economy?

On the rare instances when they have been consulted, destitute people report 'basic needs' to be dominated by the search for physical security for the body and for possessions, for sanitation and washing facilities and access to health care (which for them includes food and water).

Currently, the crucial preconditions for a state or political response are twofold. First destitute people have to have citizenship and voting rights - as they do in certain slums - and second the 'negative externalities' attributed to them (such as physical pollution,³³ the threat to the security of property and person or fears of such threats) have to threaten the wellbeing of elites.³⁴ Responses include eviction on the one hand and infrastructure and rudimentary social transfers on the other. Social interests which profit from the institutionalisation of destitution perpetuate partial and token forms of 'inclusion' which, in being inadequate and rationed, accentuate the disadvantages of the rest. The system of benefits for those below the poverty line is not accessible to people without an address. In any case, were destitute people to be made eligible, the Old Age Pension for people under the Poverty Line, for which All-India enabling legislation was enacted in 1995, is about Rs

³¹ AAA, op.cit. P35

³² Times of India September 18th, 2001

³³ Ignoring the fact that physical pollution is a direct function of wealth and income.

³⁴ This includes the threat to India's competitive advantage in the markets for FDI and tourism

125 per month (£2 or \$3).³⁵ Everywhere it is characterised by harsh eligibility criteria and inadequate coverage, supplemented in some states by a daily meal and clothing, which are now under pressure. The age threshold at 60 is quite inappropriate. Very few homeless working labourers, let alone destitute people, will reach this age. The life expectation of manual labourers is lagging one or two generations behind that of professionals or the landed elite. The pension age threshold for poor people is equivalent to age 75 to 80 in the West. In addition, pensions beneficiaries who are disabled face non-negligible extra costs due to disability for which they are not compensated.³⁶

By and large NGOs are complicit in this neglect. There are nothing more than ad hoc links between destitute people and other kinds of oppressed people or those for other reasons unable to earn wages covering their daily maintenance and generational reproduction. There is no solidarity on the part of the latter for the former. One kind of NGO response is to rehabilitate individual destitute people (particularly street children) or to provide facilities to which they may turn. Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan exemplifies a more activist, collectivist response. Having mapped homelessness in the capital and consulted homeless people on their most urgent needs, AAA is supplying health care two nights a week. On another two nights AAA tries to supply affection and encouragement, blankets to the neediest, counselling to addicts,³⁷ hospital admission and admission to shelters. The underlying long term objective is to create a cadre of development workers - with skills in health and legal knowledge - from among the street children, beggars and homeless workers themselves. A further example of where this may lead can be found in Kolkata, where a social movement of sex workers is creating new identities and communities. Politically constructed through ideology, using Freirian conscientisation and education, an egalitarian organisation has been developed in which work is legitimated, solidarity extended to those facing similar forms of oppression and an agenda struggled for. Their political goals include decriminalisation, trades union rights and rights as citizens.³⁸ But these are exceptional NGOs and movements.

All societies have destitute people. The differences in the case of India are their large numbers and their selective invisibility. The 2001 Census has not involved an attempt to census destitute people and the count of the capital's homeless is reported as having been severely compromised.³⁹ The

³⁵ Contrast this with the Minimum Wage: Rs 50 per day (Rs 1400 /£20 / £35 per month)

³⁶ For leprosy-affected pensioners the costs of dressing wounds amounts on the average to the equivalent of 6 months' disability pension (and bribes take away another month of pension). Disabled workers in S. India spend on average the equivalent of 4 months' earnings from one male agricultural labour on the direct and indirect costs of treatment. (Erb and Harriss-White, 2002, op.cit.)

³⁷ And attempts to gain access to de-addiction therapy.

³⁸ N. Gooptu 2002, 'Women of the Street will Show the Way: Collective Mobilisation, Empowerment and Recasting the Self' Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford

³⁹ I.P. Singh, 2001, ' Census of the Homeless : A Painful Farce and Assault' *The First City*, April, pp 56-59.

1991 Census estimate of the homeless is 2 million. Those suffering the after effects of leprosy are thought to be about 4.5 million.⁴⁰ In this note, the creation and survival of destitute people has been shown to be built into the structure of society, economy and state and part of India's political economy. Financial resources for a political response to destitution are entirely inadequate. By themselves they are necessary but insufficient conditions. Even so, they are likely to be easier to come by than a change in the social and political institutions of accountability which generate this degree of destitution.

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⁴⁰H. Mander , 2002, p40