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A Beacon of Hope for Destitute Women : A Study of Shanti Kutir Mahila Punarvas Kendra, Patna

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Abstract : 'Destitution' is a matter of great concern for the society. With increasing disparity in incomes and receding employment opportunities; it is constantly on the rise. It is a condition of extreme poverty and females are its greatest sufferer. Situation worsens if they belong to a deprived section of the society and become victims of maltreatment, sexual harassment and prostitution. With limited educational and occupational support, most of them have no option other than beggary. However, the Indian Government has taken up this issue seriously. Its schemes like Food Security Bill, National

Rural Employment Guarantee Act and National Old Age Pension Scheme have provided great hope to destitutes. Correspondingly, in Patna too, Shanti Kutir Mahila Punarvas Kendra, has been tackling this issue zealously ever since 2014. It has provided security, vocational skills, legal aid and rehabilitation to the destitute women brought there. Most importantly, it has made them aware of their rights and empowered them in many ways. Truly, it is a beacon of hope to destitute women.

Keywords: Destitution, Poverty, Rehabilitation, Empowerment.

Introduction :

Although the word 'destitution' is often used with the colloquial meaning of severe poverty and dependence on the goodwill of others. There is no accepted technical definition, nor does a standardized set of tools exist for analysing and quantifying destitution. The concept of 'destitution' presents challenges to several preoccupations of contemporary poverty discourse. By contrast this paper argues that destitution is intrinsically a multi-dimensional concept and it emphasizes on the severity of poverty – in contrast to 'chronic poverty' which emphasizes on the duration of poverty. In India 28.5% of the population, which is over 340 million, is destitute. In every five Indians, one is a severe destitute. There are various reasons for destitution, both economic and social.

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A lot of people who are sick; mentally or physically, are turned away from their families because they do not have the patience or resources to look after them. Some people are disowned by their families for committing crimes. Some run away from their homes due to neglect, abuse or isolation from the society, while some are simply abandoned. The destitute people form a group which is characterized by vulnerability, inability to satisfy essential needs and poor health due to the presence of a range of physical and mental illnesses. They are vulnerable to accidents and harassment including sexual harassment. Seeing vulnerability of such a huge section of society, especially that of women, the Bihar Government has launched some important schemes for the rehabilitation and well-being of these homeless people, Mukhyamantri Bhikshavriti Nivaran Yojna is one of them.

Hypotheses :

- Our first hypothesis is that there is a marked improvement in the living conditions of women after their arrival to Shanti Kutir Mahila Punarvas Kendra.
- The second hypothesis is that the security of such women after arrival to this Centre has increased.
- Since, Shanti Kutir has been active in providing vocational skills to destitute women, our third hypothesis is that the concerned women have benefitted by these skill development courses.
- Our fourth hypothesis is that these women have been provided, from time to time, useful legal aid too by the centre.
- According to our final hypothesis, women are being made aware of their rights through this Centre. In other words, this centre is empowering women inmates.

Through this study, an attempt has been made to validate such hypotheses.

Objectives :

- To throw light on the condition of destitute women.
- To bring about an awareness regarding Bihar Government's schemes and programmes to rehabilitate destitute people.
- To show the importance and role of rehabilitation centres in the lives of these poor, homeless people with special emphasis on

efforts taken by Shanti Kutir Mahila Punarvas Kendra.

Methodology :

- This project is a research project based on qualitative social approach
- This research is based on both primary (general condition and suffering of destitute women) and secondary (Bihar Statistic and government schemes and regulation) data collected.
- Information is collected through newspapers, journals, internet sources and a case study of Shanti Kutir Mahila Punarvas Kendra and its residents.

Causes of Destitution in India:

Various causes can be attributed to destitution. Some of them like unemployment, physical disability, natural calamities and domestic violence can be seen in the case of women. Many women are abandoned by their husbands, in-laws or by their children. Some women also tend to run away from their homes due to various problems, including property disputes. (Survey of Beggars, Department of Social Welfare, Bihar Government)

Unemployment remains one of the major causes of destitution. The causes of unemployment are manifold, one of them being the fact that increase in number of job opportunities has never been able to keep up with the number of people entering the labour force every year. According to surveys conducted by the Labour Bureau, Union Ministry of Labour and Employment, 208 women and 58 men out of every 1000 people are unemployed. In 2011-12, Bihar's unemployment was assessed to be 16.8% while the national average was Of 9.4%. At the national level unemployment reduced by more than half, Bihar's rates are still alarming. As per 2015-16 Unemployment rates (Fifth Annual Employment - Unemployment Survey (2015-16), Union Ministry of Labour and Employment), 60 out of every 1000 persons in Bihar are unemployed. Another aspect that needs to be brought to light while studying the causes of destitution of women are the employment rates in women. In India, 12.1% and 9.8% women are unemployed in urban and rural areas respectively.

Physical Disability is another cause of destitution, as many as 23, 31,009 people are physically disabled in Bihar (Census of India, 2011). Their disabilities vary from visual to mental retardation. Often people with disability are an additional burden on poor families and sometimes even in richer, well-off families are not able to

cope. These people usually require special love and attention, however, sometimes their families do not have the patience to deal with them and they are abandoned by them.

Natural calamities also lead to mass-scale destruction and displacement of people. Bihar is India's most flood-prone state, with 76% of the population in the North Bihar living under the recurring threat of flood devastation. According to available data, 16.5% of the total flood affected area in India is in Bihar while 22.1% of the flood affected population in India lives in Bihar. About 68,800 square kilometres (26,600 sq. mi) out of total geographical area of 94,160 square kilometres (36,360 sq. mi) comprising 73.06% is flood affected. Floods in Bihar are a recurring disaster which on an annual basis destroys thousands of human lives apart from livestock and assets worth millions. Floods often lead to displacement of people from their home towns. In a survey conducted by the state government, it was seen that a large number of beggars in Patna had been displaced by the flood in 1975 and in the end, were forced to live on the streets. Though exact data are not available, it can undoubtedly be said that the flood affects a large number of people.

The indecency and disrespect towards women in India have reached a shameful height. Rape is the fourth most common crime against women in India. More than 7,200 minors are raped every year in India. Rape victims are blamed when they should be getting sympathy of the society. The problem is acute in impoverished rural India. With proper counselling, support and understanding, survivors of rape can move on.

Other causes of destitution, include local politics, family and property disputes and heavy medical expenses.

Role of the Government :

The government of Bihar together with the government of India has launched various schemes to eradicate poverty and lower the degree of destitution in the country. Some of these schemes include, Annapurna or the Food Security Bill and the National Old Age Pension Scheme among others. The Bihar Government has also launched schemes like, State Society for Ultra-poor and Social Welfare (SSUPSW) initiative of the Department of Social Welfare are the 'Mukhyamantri Bhikshavriti Nivaran Yojna' (MBNY) and the 'Kabir Anteyeshti Anudan Yojana' (KAAY).

Role of Shanti Kutir Mahila Punarvas Kendra :

Shanti Kutir Mahila Punarvas Kendra is one such government funded NGO that runs under the Mukhyamantri Bhikshavriti Nivaran Yojna. Established in July 2014, Shanti Kutir Mahila Punarvas Kendra gives shelter to 61 women and girls, that includes beggars and destitute (The Times of India, 2014). It is run by Youth Mobilization for National Advancement (YMNA) and funded by SAKSHAM, an organization promoted by the Department of Social Welfare of Bihar. It works in close association with the Bihar police. The centre has taken in a total of 376 women and girls since its inception, out of which, 253 have been successfully rehabilitated or reunited with their family members while 25 passed away. The centre also organises awareness camps in schools and colleges.

The Centre provides women with food, clothing and medical treatment. They are also given vocational training so that they can sustain themselves after leaving the centre. Some have already secured jobs of cooks and washerwomen at the Centre itself. They make diyas, pots, wall hangings and other handcrafted items that are sold to wholesalers. They even sell these item in local fairs like the Saras Mela held in Patna annually. Some women were also pursuing their hobbies like, dance and music. They also participate in dance and music competitions. The centre has been truly putting in its best efforts to make their lives better and happier.

Findings :

- This research work identified various causes that lead to destitution of women. Some of the main causes are unemployment, domestic violence, ignorance among women and their position in the society.
- Bihar is one of the states with the highest number of destitute women in the country.
- The Bihar Government has launched various programmes and schemes that would help destitute women, like, Mukhyamantri Bhikshavriti Nivaran Yojna and Bihar Integrated Social Protection Strengthening.
- Shanti Kutir Mahila Punarvas Kendra, Patna is one such NGOs that brings hope in the lives of destitute women.
- Women had been leading a miserable life prior to their arrival at Shanti Kutir, however, after

being taken in by the centre they are living a better life.

- Women who were previously living on the streets are now living a secure life.
- They were also being provided proper medical care and treatment.
- Women were being made aware of their rights and are able to voice their opinion against female oppression.
- Women are being trained in handicrafts, dance, karate and learning many other skills.
- Some of them have also been reunited with their families due to the efforts of Shanti Kutir Mahila Punarvas Kendra.

Suggestions :

- The government should take appropriate steps to generate employment, improve the level of education among women and weaker sections of the society and take strict measures to curb human trafficking and flesh trade.
- More Rehabilitation centres to cater to the needs of destitute women should be set up.
- There should be adequate supply of funds to such rehabilitation centres to improve the quality of life in such centres.
- More government schemes should be introduced as presently there are only five Projects undertaken by SAKSHAM.
- Families should extend their support to destitute people and take care of the aged and disabled people instead of abandoning them altogether.
- The attitude of general public towards women needs to change.
- The government, public and NGOs must come together to eradicate poverty and illiteracy in the state.

Conclusion :

Under Mukhyamantri Bhikshavriti Nivaran Yojna, organizations like “**Shanti Kutir Mahila Punarvas Kendra**” are playing an important role to provide destitute women a better life and, they are making the destitute women learn some skills for economic independence. Here they have been provided with

proper medical facilities. This organization has proved to be a beacon of hope for destitute women in Bihar.

The mechanism and the working of this organization has been dealt in detail in earlier pages but the point that could be jotted down is that this NGO has put its entire effort in ameliorating women's condition and it has made them self-dependent. Many beneficiaries are under treatment and guidance of doctors and physicians and many have been discharged from the organization. The discharged beneficiaries have secured livelihood and have been registered with AADHAR under UIDAI. All of them have been holding an account in the nearby branch of Bank of Baroda.

Though the funds from the government are not adequate, many private organizations provide items of necessity like clothes, medicines, food (sweets, snacks etc.) etc. to the centre. The residents were very happy and satisfied with the services provided by the organization. Although many of them were not able to talk to us, but those who had conversation with us told us that they were happy and the organization was just like their home.

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