Page 3162 - 3172

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Exploring the Dimensions of Begging in India

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ABSTRACT

Begging in India occupies a contested space between charity and criminality, survival and exploitation. This paper examines the multiple dimensions of begging, tracing its evolution from the Vedic practice of bhiksha through its colonial recasting as vagrancy to its present treatment under state anti-beggary legislation. Drawing on Census 2011 data, the paper offers a demographic and state-wise picture of begging in India and analyses its root causes, including illiteracy, physical disability, extreme poverty, poor health, organised syndicates, migration, and addiction. It surveys the governing legal framework, including the Vagrancy Act 1824, the West Bengal Vagrancy Act 1943, and the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act 1959, and evaluates these statutes against the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution of India. The paper considers the leading judicial interventions in Ram Lakhan v. State*,* Harsh Mander v. Union of India*, and* Suhail Rashid Bhat v. State of Jammu and Kashmir*, which have progressively held the criminalisation of begging to be unconstitutional. It concludes that the state should respond to begging through rehabilitation, education, and skill-building rather than penal sanction, while reserving criminal enforcement for the organised rackets that exploit the vulnerable.*

Keywords: *Begging, Vagrancy, Bombay Prevention of Begging Act 1959, Criminalisation of poverty, Rehabilitation, Fundamental rights, Right to life and dignity.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Begging, for many, conjures the image of hands outstretched before others. When a coin falls from one person's pocket, it does little to lighten that person's burden; yet when the same coin reaches another's bowl, it ceases to be merely a coin and becomes hope, the hope of two meals in a day. If begging can carry such hope, why is it so widely disliked? The answer is vast, because nearly eight billion people view it through their own lens. Begging is commonly understood as a form of donation, and charity is itself a virtue; but it turns troubling when it is the young, who possess the capacity to shape the future, who beg; when it is children, who have only begun to learn the world, who beg; and when it is the elderly, who ought to be supported by their children, who beg.

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Many people turn to begging as a last resort to sustain their livelihood, while others adopt it as a profession to earn. Some do so of their own will and consent, while others are forced, threatened, and exploited into the act. Some beg to feed their families, and some lose their families in the course of it.

With rising unemployment, begging has become both a means of earning and a substitute for employment. It may offer a short-term solution, but it carries a ruinous long-term cost: this way of earning erodes the potential of the young and, with it, the strength of the nation.

II. Definition and evolution of begging

Begging may be defined as the act of soliciting alms or charitable aid, or the conduct of a person moving along a walkway and silently gesturing or extending the hands before the public to solicit and accept charitable donations or monetary contributions from passers-by;[1] in simpler terms, it is the act of raising one's hands before another in the hope of receiving money, food, or assistance of any kind. Begging is not a new concept; its roots reach back to the ancient and Vedic periods. In the Vedic period, students went to the gurukul for their studies and, to sustain themselves, roamed villages and settlements asking for food, known as bhiksha. Beyond students, brahmins, priests, saints, and monks also sought bhiksha, which consisted chiefly of food items such as grains, pulses, and anything edible or sustaining. In early times, the primary purpose of begging was to remain detached from the material world. Spreading gradually from the streets of villages, begging also reached the darbar of kings. Many kings held durbars in their kingdoms in which they granted people what they needed according to their will.[2] Over the years, as begging came to be seen as an opportunity to earn a livelihood, many adopted it as a profession, and many found in it a means of earning by exploiting others.

III. Criminalisation of begging

After colonisation, the British viewed beggars through the lens of the Elizabethan Poor Laws of England and introduced a new conception of begging framed around the idea of the vagrant. Vagrants were persons who were able to work but refused to do so. Colonial India required a large labour force, and people who did not work and depended on alms were regarded as a burden; this perception contributed to the criminalisation of begging. In the nineteenth century, begging came to be seen as an immoral nuisance and a threat to the public, and its once sacred

[1] Beg, Black's Law Dictionary (11th ed. 2019).
[2] See Historical Perspectives on Begging in India: From Vedic Bhiksha to Modern Vagrancy, 39 Indian J. Soc. Work 187, 187-92.

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and spiritual image gradually came to be regarded as insignificant in the eyes of society.[3] After the British period, India enacted its own statute, the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act 1959. The Act emphasised the prevention of the misuse of begging, providing for the arrest of those who beg and their rehabilitation in begging homes, among other measures.

IV. Areas of begging in India

A. Demographic analysis of begging

With a population of 1.4 billion, recording and measuring the extent of begging is a difficult task. As one of the least categorised sectors of society, begging lacks any proper mechanism of measurement in India. It is an elephant in the room: a problem everyone sees, yet which few address. It is important to examine the characteristics of those who beg by reference to factors such as age, gender, education, and health.[4] In terms of numbers, the elderly constitute the largest share, approximately 60 per cent, followed by young children at approximately 10 per cent, with the remaining 30 per cent comprising other men and women. According to the Census of 2011, this amounts to approximately 413,670 beggars in the country, of whom about 2.21 lakh are male and about 1.91 lakh are female, with the remainder being children. A state-wise breakdown is set out in the following table.[5]

Since 2011, several elections have been held, yet in none of them has any politician ventured to address the begging sector, whether their enumeration, their rehabilitation, their security, or their rights.

V. Root causes of begging

Begging may begin at any stage of life; as noted above, it is found among children, women, men, the elderly, and the young. The basic need to survive and to earn a livelihood compels people to beg, and many regard begging as an easy way to keep starvation at bay, since it requires neither qualification nor expertise. The visibility of beggars who have amassed wealth, such as Bharat Jain, with an estimated net worth of around 7.5 crore, Sarvatia Devi, said to earn around 50,000 per month, and Lakshmi Das, who began begging at the age of sixteen, draws others into the field.[6] The factors discussed below are among the causes of begging.

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[3] PMF IAS, *Criminalisation of Begging in India*, https://www.pmfias.com/criminalisation-of-begging-in-india/ (last visited Apr. 6, 2026).

[4] Aditya Singh & Olivier Brito, *A Spatial Analysis of Begging in India Using Census Data* (2021).

[5] Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, *State/UT-wise Total Beggars/Vagrants etc. in India (Census 2011)*, Press Information Bureau, Gov't of India (Dec. 14, 2021).

[6] *Top 5 Richest Beggars in India*, India Today (July 6, 2023), https://www.indiatoday.in/visualstories/information/top-5-richest-beggars-in-india-47475-06-07-2023.

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A. Illiteracy

Illiteracy is one of the most significant causes of the rising rate of begging. When a person is uneducated, it becomes difficult to find suitable employment, and begging may appear an easy alternative. In a world of rising unemployment, securing a job is difficult, and many find begging an easier path. Although other options exist, such as labour, mechanical work, plumbing, driving, or sweeping, many find it easier to depend on charitable aid or alms. Some beg out of cunning and indolence, and some out of necessity.[7]

B. Physical disability

Physical disability is not a choice but a compulsion to beg. When a person suffers from a disability and is unable to undertake any job or work, begging may appear a suitable means of survival. Such beggars are commonly found near temples, spiritual sites, or busy streets, where alms may be obtained through appeals to public sympathy.[8]

C. Extreme poverty

As already discussed, begging is often a necessity rather than a choice. When a person is unable to secure basic necessities such as food, shelter, and clothing, begging may become the only option. Extreme poverty leaves the individual with no alternative, closing the doors of survival and setting in motion a chain of events that forces a person to beg. Faced with heavy responsibilities and limited capacity to work and earn, people set aside their social standing and pride and begin to beg. Children who lack the money to obtain an education, owing to family pressures or the need to feed themselves, may beg; the elderly who cannot afford medical expenses or daily sustenance and who receive no support from their children may beg; and the young, burdened with responsibility for their families and unable to find work to secure food, clothing, and shelter, may turn to begging.[9]

D. Poor health

A person suffering from prolonged illness often begs to cover medical expenses, finding himself discriminated against in society and unable to obtain employment. The sheer need to survive compels such a person to beg. Where food is paramount, health is not treated as a basic need. A person who must feed, shelter, and clothe a family may sacrifice his own health for their sake,

[7] Shamshad et al., *Socio-Economic Causes of Begging: A Case Study of Aligarh District (U.P.)*, 4 RES. ON HUMAN. & SOC. SCI. 38, 38-42 (2014).
[8] Faiza Rasool et al., *Psychosocial Causes of Beggary: Modes and Effects of Beggary*, 2 INT'L J. SOC. SCI. & HUMAN. RES. 3432 (2023).
[9] Faiza Rasool & Rukhsana Kausar, *Psychosocial Causes of Beggary: Modes and Effects of Beggary*, 2 INT'L J. SOC. SCI. & HUMAN. RES. (Winter 2022).

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reasoning that money spent on his health could instead purchase essentials for the family. In some households, the situation is so dire that money spent on one person's health would leave other members to die of poverty. When the stomach is empty and the body is exposed, health ceases to take priority.

E. Illegal syndicates

Among the most dangerous dimensions of begging is its operation as an organised, immoral business that runs contrary to public order. Begging controlled by criminals, mafia networks, and gangsters sustains a lucrative shadow economy. Children, the elderly, and the disabled are pushed into this trade through human trafficking. The revenue earned from begging is entirely untaxed and finds no place in government records. Organised criminals kidnap people and children, mutilate their limbs, injure their bodies, and render them deaf or blind, then force them to beg by exploiting public sympathy. Much of the revenue from this sector is said to be diverted to funding political activity, illicit enterprises, and the black market. The syndicate divides territory into zones such as stations, shops, malls, temples, parks, institutions, and other areas that attract large crowds. The daily takings are collected from the beggars through syndicate agents, leaving the beggar with only a small share by way of commission.[10]

F. Migration

Migration becomes a cause of begging because natural disasters, famines, and other calamities often leave people stripped of their health and wealth and force them to move from one place to another in search of a new life. When they relocate, they face difficulty in earning and in finding new work, and may choose begging as an easier means of survival. In some cases, people migrate from one country to another illegally or without proper documentation; lacking the knowledge or means to work and earn abroad, they may find begging the only available option.

G. Addiction and free will

This cause is seen chiefly among the young who are exposed at an early age to criminal activity, drugs, and other harmful habits, or who fall into addiction. When such habits become entrenched, the need for money to sustain them becomes vital, and in the grip of addiction people disregard the consequences and focus only on earning enough to satisfy their cravings. When addiction dominates, people neglect nutrition, housing, and employment, lose their jobs, exhaust their savings, and damage their relationships. They lose their social standing and

[10] Shamshad, *Socio-Economic Causes of Begging*, ResearchGate (Aug. 15, 2014).

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dignity, and as their capacity to work declines, they may turn to other means such as theft, begging, fraud, and further criminal activity.

VI. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

As a subject within the legislative competence of the states, begging is not governed by any single federal law providing for its regulation or criminalisation. In the absence of a national law, each state either enacts its own legislation or adopts the laws of other states; such laws remain in force in at least twenty states and union territories.[11] When each state treats begging according to its own laws and jurisdiction, it becomes difficult for the central government to regulate and maintain uniform law and order on the subject.

Looking back through history, no specific law or guideline regulating begging is found in the ancient or medieval periods. Begging drew the attention of the British government during the colonial period, when beggars came to be regarded as a burden upon the project of establishing the empire in India. The British viewed begging as vagrancy and as a moral affront to the public, rather than as an economic problem. The principal laws governing begging are discussed below.

A. Vagrancy Act 1824

Although its name reflects its European origin, the Vagrancy Act 1824 also applied to India, since the British then ruled the country. This two-hundred-year-old law focused on criminalising begging, describing homeless persons as rogues and vagabonds. The Act criminalised sleeping, begging, and fortune-telling in public places.[12] It provided for penalties and punishments such as hard labour, whipping, and menial work, and it presently imposes a penalty of up to GBP 1,000.[13] The Act empowered officers and authorised individuals to arrest, detain, or take into custody persons suspected of these offences, and it regulated the duties of constables in maintaining law and order.[14] The Act further regulated the administration governing the records of arrest and release of those involved in begging and vagrancy. Its provisions addressed the binding of witnesses, the right of a convicted person to appeal, clerical accuracy, the standardisation of legal process to ensure consistency across jurisdictions, and the legal protection of the officers and judges enforcing it.[15]

In sum, the Act was enacted to control the rapid growth of homelessness and poverty; it criminalised begging, homelessness, and the soliciting of alms, and provided for the arrest of

[11] Anti-Begging Laws in India, iPleaders Blog, https://blog.ipleaders.in/anti-begging/ (last visited Apr. 6, 2026).
[12] Vagrancy Act 1824, § 4 (UK).
[13] Vagrancy Act 1824, § 3 (UK).
[14] Vagrancy Act 1824, §§ 6-13 (UK).
[15] Vagrancy Act 1824, §§ 15-21 (UK).

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those who slept on the streets. Despite these efforts, controlling begging and vagrancy proved beyond the Act's reach, and the government has resolved to repeal it by spring 2026.

B. West Bengal Vagrancy Act 1943

This legislation was enacted by the Government of West Bengal, through the Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare, to regulate and manage vagrancy and beggary across the state. Under the Act, a person found asking for alms or wandering in a public place was treated as a beggar.[16] Where the police found a vagrant begging, the person was produced before a special magistrate for inquiry.[17] By order of the magistrate, vagrants were detained and sent to a rehabilitation centre for medical examination, and were later transferred to a vagrants' home for permanent detention and rehabilitation training. Although detained, the Act contained mandatory provisions for separating different classes of beggars and vagrants, such as children, women, the mentally ill, the elderly, and the physically disabled.[18] The Act prescribed rigorous imprisonment of up to two years for those who solicited alms or engaged others to do so, and imprisonment of up to six months for any person who escaped or refused to appear before the magistrate.[19]

C. Bombay Prevention of Begging Act 1959

This Act is the parent statute for the various Acts enacted across the different states of India and closely resembles the Vagrancy Act 1824. It is not a federal law but a state-level legislation focused on criminalising begging. The Act defines begging primarily as soliciting alms in public through acts such as dancing, gymnastics, singing, or performing tricks; and it extends beyond those who ask for money to include persons who wander about with no visible means of subsistence or who appear to exist only on the charity of others.[20] The Act confers wide powers on the police, including the power to arrest beggars without a warrant.[21] This provision plainly conflicts with Article 21 of the Constitution of India, for a person, whether a beggar, a pauper, or a vagrant, retains the liberty to live. Following arrest, the police must produce the person before a magistrate for inquiry, after which, depending on the gravity of the offence, the magistrate may impose penalties and order detention in a rehabilitation centre or prison.[22] Although enacted to curb begging in the State of Bombay, the Act came to apply as far as Delhi

[16] West Bengal Vagrancy Act, 1943, § 2(9), No. 21, Acts of the West Bengal Legislature, 1943 (India).
[17] *Id.* § 6.
[18] *Id.* § 13.
[19] *Id.* §§ 15, 19.
[20] The Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959, § 2, No. 10, Acts of the Bombay Legislature, 1959 (India).
[21] *Id.* § 4.
[22] *Id.* § 5.

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and served as a model for several other Indian states. Far from being free of criticism, the Act has drawn considerable censure for criminalising poverty and homelessness. In her article "Laws for Beggars, Justice for Whom: A Critical Review of the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act 1959", Dyuti Moy Mukherjee examines the Act's punitive and unconstitutional provisions, criticises the inhumane powers vested in the police, and suggests various means of reducing begging without compromising the rights of the poor. The Act is criticised chiefly for violating fundamental rights, including Article 14 (equality before the law), Article 19(1)(a) (freedom of speech and expression), and Article 21 (right to life and dignity). Rather than criminalising begging, the Act ought to focus on providing the basic necessities of livelihood.

Beyond these specific Acts, the Constitution of India itself contains provisions bearing on begging. Article 21 secures the right to earn a livelihood and the freedom to choose one's profession and to live with dignity. The Constitution thus, on one hand, supports a person's right to earn, while on the other, restraints on begging seek to prevent exploitation and human trafficking, an approach that risks running with the hare and hunting with the hounds. Article 23 guarantees the right against exploitation; it is a blessing for those who have been kidnapped and forced to beg, since it prohibits human trafficking and forced labour, yet it also affects those who fight for survival by begging. When the law seeks to clear the streets by reducing the number of beggars and vagrants, it also sweeps away those who beg of their own free will and consent. Under Article 39, among the Directive Principles of State Policy, the Constitution directs the state to ensure that citizens have adequate means of livelihood and are not driven by poverty and weak economic conditions. Entry 15 of List III empowers both the Union and the states to reform the laws relating to vagrancy, begging, and nomadic tribes; yet, instead of pursuing reform, governments have found it more convenient to criminalise begging. Criminalisation may be defensible insofar as it disrupts organised begging rackets and syndicates that exploit children, men, women, the elderly, the disabled, and the mentally ill.

Article 19(1)(a), guaranteeing freedom of speech and expression, supports the view that a person should be permitted to beg where it becomes a question of survival, for it grants every citizen the right to express, to speak, and to ask in order to earn a livelihood. When a person begs or solicits alms, communication with and appeal to the public become necessary to obtain money. Nowhere does the Constitution provide for the criminalisation of begging. Criminalisation is a direct violation of the Constitution; begging may be regarded as immoral or contrary to public policy, but restricting or criminalising it directly violates the rights of the individual. The fact that conduct is immoral or contrary to public policy does not mean it must be banned or treated as a crime; it should instead be addressed through remedies such as

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rehabilitation, education, and skill development, while protecting the rights of the individual. Whether rich or poor, the beggar remains part of society, the nation, the government, and, most importantly, the democracy. To criminalise begging is to punish a part of the body itself. It is the responsibility of the state to ensure health, nutrition, and protection against unemployment, and to provide public assistance to the elderly, the sick, and the disabled. While restrictions on begging may reduce human trafficking and exploitation, criminalising begging would be a worse course still.

VII. JUDICIAL INTERVENTIONS

In *Ram Lakhan v. State*,[23] a person was found begging with outstretched hands at a railway crossing in Rampur, Delhi, carrying a sum of Rs. 47. The court observed that "beggars are not beasts with claws; they are human beings and they should be treated as such". It held that, before passing any order, the circumstances of the person begging, including character, age, mental condition, and economic condition, and whether the person begs by choice or by necessity, must be taken into consideration.

In 2018, the activist Harsh Mander challenged the treatment of beggars as criminals as a clear violation of their fundamental and human rights. In *Harsh Mander v. Union of India*,[24] the Delhi High Court declared most of the provisions of the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act 1959, as extended to Delhi, unconstitutional, holding that the criminalisation of begging offends Articles 14, 19, and 21. The court held that begging should not be criminalised as a by-product of socio-economic imbalance and inadequate welfare administration. To live with dignity is the right of every person, and forcing a person to choose between starvation and crime places that person in an impossible dilemma. The court emphasised that the state must pursue policies for the upliftment of society and engage proper rehabilitation projects so that the criminal stigma attached to begging may be dispelled. The court did not interfere with the regulation of forced or organised begging carried out with unlawful intent, leaving the government free to act against the syndicates and rackets that exploit those struggling to survive in poverty. While soliciting alms is justified in the name of fundamental and human rights, compelling others to beg is purely a criminal act. The state should focus on rehabilitative solutions rather than criminalisation, for begging is often a necessity and not a choice.

In *Suhail Rashid Bhat v. State of Jammu and Kashmir*,[25] decided in 2019, the court held that banning begging conflicts with the rights under Articles 14, 19, and 21, and accordingly

[23] *Ram Lakhan v. State*, 137 (2007) DLT 173 (India).
[24] *Harsh Mander v. Union of India*, 2018 SCC OnLine Del 10427 (India).
[25] *Suhail Rashid Bhat v. State of Jammu & Kashmir*, 2019 SCC OnLine J&K 829 (India).

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declared the Jammu and Kashmir Prevention of Beggary Act 1960 and the Jammu and Kashmir Prevention of Beggary Rules 1964 unconstitutional. The court held that begging is a means of communicating or requesting aid, and that criminalising or restricting it conflicts with the right to freedom of speech and expression. Criminalising begging targets individuals on the basis of their socio-economic status, poverty, and the unjust conditions in which they survive, and does not serve the guarantee of equality before the law. The judgment also noted that the Act rested on colonial-era assumptions that treated the poor as a nuisance or as injurious to society, a view requiring change, which led the court to declare the anti-beggary laws unconstitutional. The court emphasised that it would be unjust to punish individuals for the state's failure to provide basic necessities and social security.

VIII. IMPACT ON SOCIETY AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Beyond its impact on the individual, begging leaves a deep mark on society. It exposes the wretched condition of poverty on the streets of the nation, traps people into dependence on the charity of others, and erodes their own initiative, productivity, and capacity to work, breeding indolence and a habit of repeated solicitation. When a person becomes habituated to begging, the result is a substantial loss of human resource. People feel generous in helping the needy, but when the needy become a familiar feature of daily life, the giving begins to feel burdensome. Amid rising unemployment and the struggle to keep pace with society, begging draws in considerable human capital whose potential could otherwise contribute to national development; the effect on the economy is negative.

Begging carries different connotations depending on the place and the person involved. People do not hesitate to give in the name of religion, God, and charity, but when asked to help someone in genuine distress, to contribute towards medical treatment, or to provide another with two meals a day, they are reminded of their own difficulties. Such responses may reflect the donor's sympathy, but the tension often arises from instances of feigned need. As discussed above, the varied causes of begging, ranging from poverty to the funding of addiction, reveal the difference between necessity and choice. Begging may be justified, but when a person begs to feed an addiction, it becomes a thorn in the donor's eye. The need to beg in order to sustain a drug habit compels reflection on how the act of begging should be regulated by law.

The condition of beggars is often deplorable, giving rise to extreme marginalisation, widespread social discrimination, and a damaged public image. The misfortune born of poverty pushes a person towards unlawful means and fosters a habit of dependency. Many beggars lack valid identity documents, which gives rise to suspicion, insecurity, and public harassment. Beggars

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are frequently exploited at the hands of the police, who may level false charges against them to shield the actual culprits who have bribed them, thereby branding the beggar a criminal even where no offence has been committed; their manner of living and behaviour alone often suffices to have them treated as criminals. The lack of education is largely responsible for disorderly conduct, improper activity, poor understanding, and public disruption.

Organised cartels and syndicates often kidnap children, dress them to appear as though they belong to conditions of extreme poverty, and force them to beg repeatedly, even when they are beaten or ignored by the public while soliciting alms. Through their association with these illegal networks, the children begin to learn criminal conduct at a very young age, which contributes to the making of habitual offenders.

IX. Rehabilitation and cure of begging

To end begging is akin to draining an ocean; begging is directly proportional to population, which makes its eradication a formidable task. The principal difficulty lies in identifying beggars, who differ widely in age, health, wealth, education, and background. Setting aside these obstacles, rehabilitation can nonetheless be assured for a large number of beggars. The major cause of begging is financial crisis in the individual's life; if a person is provided with paid work, that person will be unlikely to choose a path that costs his standing in the eyes of society. The difficulty is that any work requires at least basic knowledge of the task. This approach can largely prevent begging by those who are young, not physically disabled, mentally fit, and free of addiction. For children, women, and the mentally ill, however, proper care, guidance, and the knowledge needed to earn a livelihood are required.

It is the responsibility of the government to work for the welfare of beggars, a responsibility it has too often neglected. Beyond the government, the judiciary should establish a committee linked with the human rights council, comprising at least twelve to fifteen young members such as new lawyers, journalists, and social workers, whose task would be to conduct field surveys and place beggars in non-governmental organisations and rehabilitation centres. Rehabilitation centres should be properly staffed with doctors, teachers, coaches, caregivers, and other essential personnel of appropriate qualification, and should maintain separate sections for different classes of beggars.

In this way, both ends would be served: the new generation would gain employment, and proper care could be extended to this discriminated and exploited section of society.

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