

SIPRA DAS



NAMELESS DEATH

There has been a shocking increase in the number of unidentified bodies found on Delhi streets every year. But the police and civic authorities don't seem to have a solution to this growing problem.

DEATH BY THE ROAD: Unclaimed bodies are mostly of migrants

By Shefalee Vasudev

At an electric crematorium in Delhi, a body tied up in a white sheet waits for a worker to push it into the furnace—the final journey into nothingness. There are no mourners, no claimants, proving true the oldest of all sayings—everyone is alone in death. For the homeless, this is also the story of their lives—shunned and forsaken. And, as a recent study on the homeless in Delhi points out, that is how thousands of people live and die every year—unclaimed.

Spearheaded by Joint Commissioner of Delhi Police Amod Kanth, this analysis of Delhi Police and NGO figures makes it clear that the number of unclaimed bodies has steadily risen in the past decade. From 2,305 bodies in 1996, the number jumped to 3,047 in 2001 and 3,250 in 2003. Delhi has roughly 150 crematoriums, with about

60 located in urban areas. Out of these, four electric crematoriums have been designated by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) for unidentified bodies. While these four crematoriums don't substantiate the extent of the problem, their records validate the findings of the study. At the Sarai Kale Khan electric crematorium itself, of the 120 dead bodies cremated in the past one month, 91 were unidentified ones brought by the police.

Though on an average 10 unclaimed bodies are found in Delhi every day, the subject receives more evasion than empathy. "It is surprising why nobody has raised this issue," says Kanth, adding that the problem needs urgent ownership as it has long been shrugged off by various government departments. DCP North (Delhi) Sanjay Baniwal, from whose policing area more than 70 per cent of the unidentified bodies in the city are found, agrees that the gravity of this

problem is not recognised. The bodies found on the roadsides are usually those of rickshaw pullers, rag pickers, beggars, porters, hawkers, construction and domestic workers, many of them hardcore drug addicts. When passers by, sweepers or pavement dwellers inform the police, an MCD van is called to take away the corpse to a hospital morgue. According to the law—Clause 174 of the CrPc (Criminal Procedure Code)—all unnatural deaths are subjected to an inquest. This is a probe to find out if there is a criminal reason behind the death. Once that is done and no visible marks of injury are seen on the body and if the dead person clearly looks poor or starved, the police can legally waive off a post-mortem. In the records of mortuaries in government hospitals, the causes of death of such people are listed as starvation, cold, heatstroke, illness, drug abuse—what-ever seems obvious, but not necessarily

proven. Volunteers of Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan, an NGO, once found a highly decomposed body in the walled city. A post-mortem revealed that death had occurred at least three months back.

But it is not the insensitivity towards the dead that shrouds this morbid story. There is a disregard for the rights of the living. Ask 13-year-old Nitin, an orphan. His body wracked by a chronic cough, he begs on most days outside the Hanuman Mandir in Delhi and spends his nights battling the cold and cruelty of the city at a night shelter. Nitin has no ration card, no identity, no home—there is no one to claim his body if he dies. Horrific stories of helplessness seep out, turning the blazing idea of India Shining completely on its head. "There is no infrastructure, no funds to handle the problems of these people and almost nil rehabilitation," says Baniwal.

Facts support his argument. There are more than 1,00,000 homeless people in Delhi and despite the steadily inflating number of migrant labourers, night shelters set up during winters by



HEMANT CHAWLA

DIM VIEW: Children at a night shelter

DYING DECLARATIONS

EXTREME WEATHER: Four lakh migrants come to Delhi every year. Many live on the streets. In the absence of permanent shelters, extreme heat and cold weather claims many lives.

STARVATION: Street dwellers eat food donated outside religious places but its neither enough nor regular. Serious malnutrition is a big killer.

UNMONITORED DRUG ADDICTION: Most street dwellers are addicted to cheap drugs. This makes them vulnerable to deadly diseases. Also, they are not listed in area police stations.

NO POST MORTEM: Clear disregard for inquest or post-mortem in the case of destitutes. Causes listed as illness, drug abuse, heat stroke or cold.

the state Government decreased from 19 in 2002 to 12 in 2003. The only night shelters worth their while are those run by NGOs.

Shockingly, there is not a single permanent government night shelter in the city for women who live and sleep on the streets, exposed to a variety of threats to their life and dignity. Social workers Vipin Kumar and Afsar Ahmed Khan relate the plight of a mute adolescent girl who was forcibly brought to Delhi by a truck driver and later abandoned. "She has no family, no work, no shelter," says Kumar.

Equally tormenting is the story of 27-year-old Damyanti who lives on a footpath. Three years ago, she was raped but has no recollection of the rapist. "In the day we are victims of poverty and at night of the whims of men on the streets," she says sobbing.

Under flyovers, beneath bridges, outside temples and gurdwaras, in temporary night shelters, on railway and bus stations, people lead lives

which are worse than death. They have names, but no addresses. To survive this life devoid of any human dignity, men, women and, alarmingly, children take recourse to cheap drugs. INDIA TODAY came across many street children who said they were addicted to Eraser, a spirit-based stationery whitener which they call "solution". Available for Rs 13 a bottle, children dab it on dirty rags and sniff, getting stoned in minutes. Smack addicts are seen everywhere, injecting unlabelled fluids with dirty syringes into their bodies, increasing the risk of HIV infection manifold and becoming carriers of other deadly diseases.

No one from this destitute crowd figures in any government record. Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit agrees that it is a big and porous problem, not one that can be resolved easily by planning or policies. "About four lakh people come to Delhi every year. Some work as domestic or casual labourers, others beg in the city. It is not something as simple as bringing out a policy. It requires police, people and the MCD

Last year alone, 3,250 unidentified bodies were found in Delhi.

CREMATING THE UNIDENTIFIED

Burning Question

Why just the bodies, even ashes lie uncollected. Out of the 150 crematoriums in Delhi, 22 had 4,181 sacks that contained unclaimed human ashes. These were not only ashes of unidentified bodies and abandoned people, but also those cremated with all the rituals by their families. With help from do-gooders, some Delhi journalists of *Vir Arjun* newspaper ensured an immersion of these in the Ganga at Hardwar. "The soul remains captive until the ashes are immersed with proper rites," they say.

Elsewhere, NGOs are filling in for families. Once a fortnight, a van from a charitable trust in Hardwar collects sacks of ashes from crematoriums in Delhi. Then there is Lawaaris Baba, who sits outside G.B. Pant Hospital in a Delhi and helps give more than a decent cremation to unclaimed bodies. People seek him out whenever there is an unidentified body and he raises money to cremate it with all the rituals. One day, he hopes, somebody will do the same for him.



LAST RIGHT: Sacks of ashes at Hardwar; Lawaaris Baba (below)

working towards it," says Dikshit. MCD Commissioner Rakesh Mehta also feels that migration is the biggest cause behind the rising number of unclaimed bodies in Delhi.

Undoubtedly, migrant workers are the worst hit in city life. Without home, hearth, shelter, sanitation or communication facilities, they are remotely, if at all, connected to their hometowns. A monthly money order is their only link with those who they earn for. In case of death, the law stipulates that an unidentified body be kept in a morgue of a government hospital for 72 hours before it is cremated. The police can extend this period if the dead person is well-dressed and obviously does not look like a destitute. But for migrant labourers, by the time their family



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learns of the tragedy—which is often a month later when a money order does not reach—the body has long been cremated. What remains is a gunny bag at a crematorium containing the ashes of someone who may be the only earning member of a poor family. "Many of the unclaimed bodies are those of regular workers who had actively contributed to the economy but there is no record of their identities," says Kanth.

Solutions are offered in bits and pieces but neither the Delhi Government nor the Centre-controlled police seem to have a cohesive ready-to-implement plan to deal with the problem. Dikshit feels that registration of migrant labourers at construction sites and verification details of domestic workers will help in identifying unclaimed bodies. She feels people should get their domestic helps verified by the police. However, Mehta believes that this is the joint responsibility of civic authorities and the Police Department. Kanth, however, feels that if ration and voter identity cards are given to migrant people, it will be easy to inform their families in case of death.

"When there are no claimants, the least that can be done is to give the bodies a decent cremation," says Dikshit. Mehta defensively says that even though the cost of cremating a body at an electric crematorium is higher at Rs 1,800 than if it is cremated on a wooden pyre which costs just Rs 1,200, the MCD sees to it that all unclaimed bodies get quick and well-managed cremations at the electrified facilities.

The arithmetic might be good. But what about the attitude? This may soon become a nationwide concern. According to the 2001 Census of India, there are 6.5 crore homeless people in India. If thousands of bodies go unclaimed every year in Delhi itself, the figure extrapolated across the country would be staggering. Various government departments like social welfare, health, police, the municipal bodies, NGOs and the common people will have to join hands to include the migrant labourers and the poor in the city records and list them down as human beings. And not just after their death. ■