

Homeless suffer in Indian cold wave

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In India's Uttar Pradesh state, where 165 people had died by January 18, thousands of poor and homeless people were seen huddled around small wood fires, trying to protect themselves from severe cold. Deaths were also reported from the Indian capital New Delhi and the Indian states of West Bengal, Punjab, Haryana, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Officials reported more than 100 deaths in northern Bangladesh.

Winter deaths are not a new development in these regions—they occur annually. The toll is higher this year, because the temperatures have fallen several degrees further than normal. New Delhi recorded its lowest temperature in seven decades, 0.2 degrees Celsius. In more mountainous regions, temperatures have plunged to minus 7 degrees.

"I have never, never felt so cold in my life," said Uma Ishwar, a housewife and a south Delhi resident. "I can barely move myself, and the water coming from the tap seems like liquid ice."

Although not low by world standards, the temperatures have caused extreme hardships, particularly for undernourished and underweight people, which include those already vulnerable following the loss of their homes during last year's floods. According to relief agencies, thousands of people are suffering cold-related conditions (colds, fever, pneumonia, asthma, respiratory complications) and seeking treatment.

Fatalities could be entirely prevented, if people had adequate facilities. In New Delhi, an estimated 100,000 homeless people are extremely vulnerable.

According to a recent report by the Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN), a human rights group, only 12 permanent shelters, 16 temporary shelters, four porta cabins and 22 temporary tents are available for the homeless, offering shelter to just 6,200 people. The

report warned: "[T]he state of being homeless presents an undeniably harsh and unforgiving reality for anyone, especially during the winter months."

The 22 tents set up by the Delhi government offer little protection. As quoted in the HLRN report, Ram Kishan, a project officer for Ashray Adhikar Abhiyan (AAA), a rights body that conducted a study of Delhi's homeless, said: "The tents are mostly constructed of poor quality material, often with gaping holes. They are by and large flimsy and crude and do not provide adequate protection from the cold and rain."

Malavika Vartak of the HLRN criticised the authorities: "As we find ourselves in the midst of a particularly severe winter the need for decisive action to ease the suffering of Delhi's homeless has never been more acute. This sense of urgency, tragically, has remained conspicuously absent from the response of the city's relevant municipal authorities."

New Delhi's homeless are mainly unemployed people from rural areas in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, who have come to the city seeking work. "The homeless are largely people escaping desperate poverty. Nobody would choose such brutalised conditions," commented Harsh Mander, director of the Centre for Equity Studies.

Having come to New Delhi they face terrible exploitation. Many men work as labourers—handcart pullers, loaders, rickshaw pullers and casual workers. According to an AAA study in 2000, 72 percent of working homeless people are paid less than the minimum wage. More than half are illiterate and 83 percent have no identification documents like ration cards or voter registration cards. While 32 percent have been on the street for less than one year, 22 percent have lived on the pavements for over 10 years.

In winter they struggle to find places to sleep in the few overcrowded shelters. "Yesterday, an old man came to this shelter. He was wearing only a thin shirt

and could not stop shivering. He was crying a lot because he had nowhere to sleep,” said Yasmin, a 27-year-old woman staying in a homeless shelter near India’s largest mosque, the Jama Masjid, built by Mughal emperor Shahjahan in the seventeenth century.

The shelter was merely a tent with a naked bulb for light, offering no real protection. Yasmin herself had lost her four-month-old baby to the cold.

The Indian government’s callous attitude can be seen from the fact that no official estimate has been made of the number of homelessness people in Delhi since the 1991 Census. According to the AAA: “Given that the numbers of homeless have been expanding inexorably ever since, largely due to government policies and actions, the 1991 figure of approximately 29,000 homeless, which continues to be cited by authorities, is a gross underestimation.”

This indifference dominates the authorities at all levels—central government, state governments and municipalities—which have failed to provide even basic facilities such as heating. They have essentially abandoned poor people to their fates.



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