

Pavement Dwellers of Kolkata: A Geographical Appraisal

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ABSTRACT

Homelessness has put forward the questions of survival and sustenance of life of a sizeable number of people in almost every country of the world. Some social thinkers view it as inevitable result of the capitalist form of society. Geographically, this issue is more critical in the populous nations of the third world, but is quite evident in the technology-rich and industrially advanced nations of the West too. Recently, homelessness has contributed havoc in the world order. Rootlessness, in most cases, is direct result of either natural or purely political phenomenon, but the failure of economic systems is not least. Market forces, job security and various other push and pull forces have been consequent upon the economic distress of a number of people making them compelled to rush to the urban centers for earning to support their life, though without any secured job or shelter.

The present study is an attempt to investigate into the causes of pavement dwelling of a sizeable number of people in parts of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation area and to present a concise description about their socio-economic lifestyle. The study critically discusses the phenomenon with the help of available secondary data as well as primary data gathered from interview and field observation. The study reveals that migration, poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing facilities etc. are some instrumental forces behind the phenomenon of homelessness. A detailed study about the demographic, educational and economic condition of the pavement dwellers exhibits the harsh reality of their every day's life.

Keywords: Homelessness, job security, market forces, pavement dwelling, rootlessness.

INTRODUCTION:

Pavement dwellers are the rootless and identityless people in an urban center who are compelled to spend their night under the open sky and carry on their daily activity without curtain. They are the marginalized strata of the urban society, poorest of the poor in terms of living condition, health condition, accessibility to the basic life support systems and social justice. Near about 100 million people of the world are now homeless of which 20-40% lives in urban areas (<http://www.hic-net.org>). Nowadays, the issue of homelessness has achieved a global concern as almost all of the urban centers throughout the world are characterized with such phenomenon. This paper is an attempt to probe into the lifestyle of the pavement dwellers and to search out the prime causes of pavement dwelling in Kolkata.

OBJECTIVES:

The principal objectives of the present study are:

- i) to search out the root causes of pavement dwelling in the city, and
- ii) to assess the socio-economic and demographic status of the community along with their problems.

THE STUDY AREA:

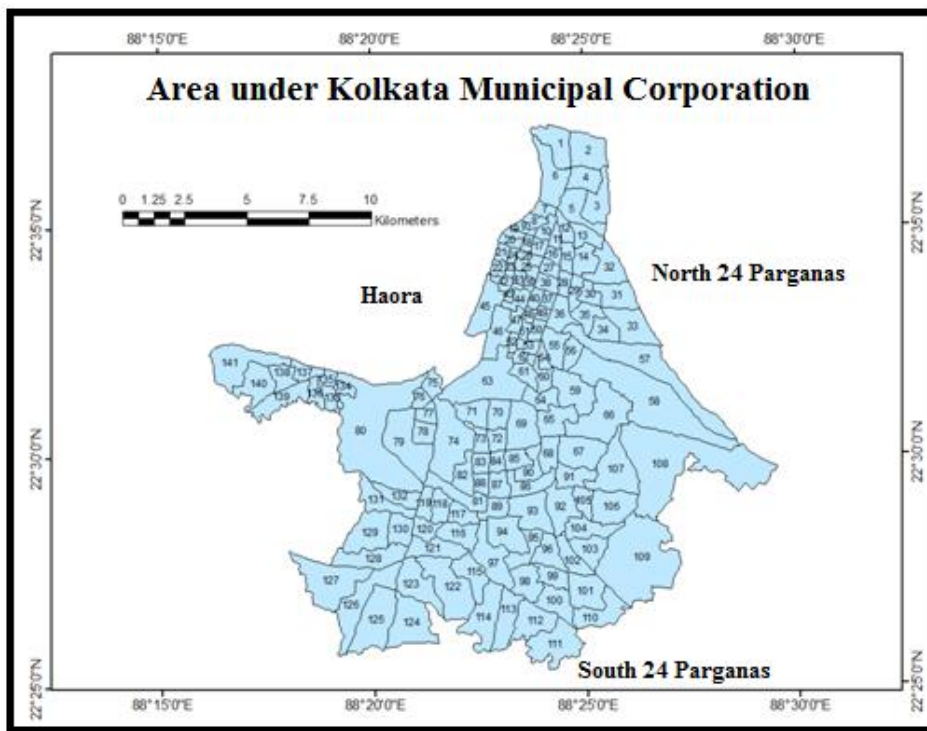


Fig. 1: The Study Area

Kolkata (22°27' N to 22°39' N latitude and 88°14' E to 88°26' E longitude), the capital city of West Bengal is located at the eastern bank of the River Hooghly in the southern portion of the state. It is the third largest urban agglomeration of India which accommodates 4.5 million people, whereas the greater Kolkata do the same for 14.1 million population (Census 2011). Established in 1876, the Kolkata Municipal Corporation at present has 141 wards, divided into 15 boroughs, covering a total area of 185 km². About 12,250 families reside in the footpaths of Kolkata and they count for a total homeless population of 69,798 (Census 2011).

DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY:

The study has been carried out systematically through successive stages including collection, tabulation, analysis and representation of data and information. This descriptive research endeavor has used both secondary and primary data. The secondary data has been collected from different reports published by Census of India and Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA). Different journals and research papers have also been consulted to build the conceptual framework of the study. On contrary, primary data has been collected from March 2017 to June 2017 through face to face interview and interaction with the pavement dwellers in the surrounding areas of Sealdah and College Street and BBD Bag and Burrabazar and their surrounding areas with the help of purposive semi-structured questionnaire. Total 160 households with 524 members have been approached as sample through simple random sampling technique. Simple statistical methods and cartographic techniques have been used for representation.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Despite the inadequacy of proper government record or secondary data, the pavement dwellers of different urban centers, especially those who live in the footpaths of the Kolkata Metropolis have been studied by different scholars of different discipline especially by the anthropologists and sociologists. Almost all the previous studies are predominantly confined with the living condition, the demographic and socio-economic status, family characteristics, occupation profile etc. of the socially excluded and the most deprived class of the urban society along with some other contemporary issues like rehabilitation, poverty, malnutrition, public health, security etc. (Tribhuvan & Andreassen, 2003); (Patra & Anand, 2008); (Das, 2013); (Mustaquim & Ismail, 2013); (Adhikari, 2014); (Dey & Majumdar, 2015); (Basu, 2016). (Bela Bhattacharya, 1996) in her book entitled "Slums and Pavement Dwellers of Kolkata

Metropolis” (1996) presents a detailed ethnographic study regarding the demographic profile, living condition, occupational characteristics and indebtedness, social associations and social relations of the pavement dwellers with special reference to the house maids (*‘KajerLok’*). In 2012, she has explained the temporal changes in socio-demographic structure and economic life of the community between 1990 and 2007 with special emphasis on human rights in her study entitled “Homeless Pavement Dwellers: A Case Study of their Social Awareness in Kolkata from Human Rights Perspective”. (Jagannathan & Halder, 1988); (Jagannathan & Halder, 1989) in their three consecutive articles entitled “Income-Housing Linkages: A Case Study of Pavement Dwellers in Calcutta” (1988), “A Case Study of Pavement Dwellers in Calcutta: Occupation, Mobility and Rural-Urban Linkages” (1988) and “A Case Study of Pavement Dwellers in Calcutta: Family Characteristics of the Urban Poor” (1989) discuss the issue with special reference to family characteristics, occupational pattern and income status, rural urban mobility and linkage. (Chiranjit Mukherjee) in his article “A Study on Socio- Educational and Rehabilitation Status of Street Children in Kolkata” (2014) has put more emphasis on the condition of the vulnerable street children of the city whereas (Debarati Bagchi) in her study “Street Dwelling and City Space: Women Waste Pickers in Kolkata” (2016) has explained the spatial dimension of the dwelling places of a definite occupational group i.e. the women waste pickers. It also explains the relationship between the contingencies of their occupation and the question of social reproduction. (Nooe & Patterson) in their paper entitled “The Ecology of Homelessness” (2010) have developed an ecological model covering almost all the causal factors especially biophysical risk factors (both individual and structural) of the phenomenon of homelessness for the urbanized and industrialized Western world. The phenomenon of homelessness is a deep rooted and multifaceted issue which has specific economic, social, political, infrastructural and cultural dimensions. The causal factors have been studied carefully to understand and to identify the deep structure behind the ecology of homelessness rather to describe the problem superficially. The study regarding the implication of social justice in their life needs to get importance with the changing social dynamics of the city as well as the discipline in contemporary period.

HOMELESSNESS IN INDIA: A QUANTITATIVE ACCOUNT:

Table: 1 Homeless Population in India(Lakhs)

Year	Total	Rural	Urban
1961	11.65	9.7	1.95
1971	19.86	15.2	4.66
1981	23.43	17.24	6.19
1991	20.07	12.82	7.25
2001	19.44	11.65	7.89
2011	17.72	8.34	9.38

Source: Different Census Reports

Albeit the overall percentage of homeless population has been decreasing over the last decade (2001 -2011) but 1.77 million people still live in the street sharing 0.15% of the country's total population (Table: 1). Of them, 52.9 % lives in urban areas whereas 47.1% in rural areas (Census, 2011). The rural areas show 28% decline in houseless population, whereas the urban centers have reported 20% increase from 2001-2011. Nearly 26% of the homeless population in urban India lives in the top five metros (Kumuda, 2014), whereas 65.3% of homeless population is spread over six states of India: Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh (Fig: 2). West Bengal, with 134040 homeless people (68.52 % Male and 31.48% Female) comprises 7.78 % of nation’s total. Kolkata, the capital city as well as the smallest district of the state, has recorded highest concentration of houseless population that comprises 52.07% of the state’s total followed by North 24 Pgs. (6.81%), North Dinajpur (6.16%), Haora (4.25%), South 24 Pgs. (4.06%) and Bardhaman (3.77%) (Table:2) (Fig: 4).

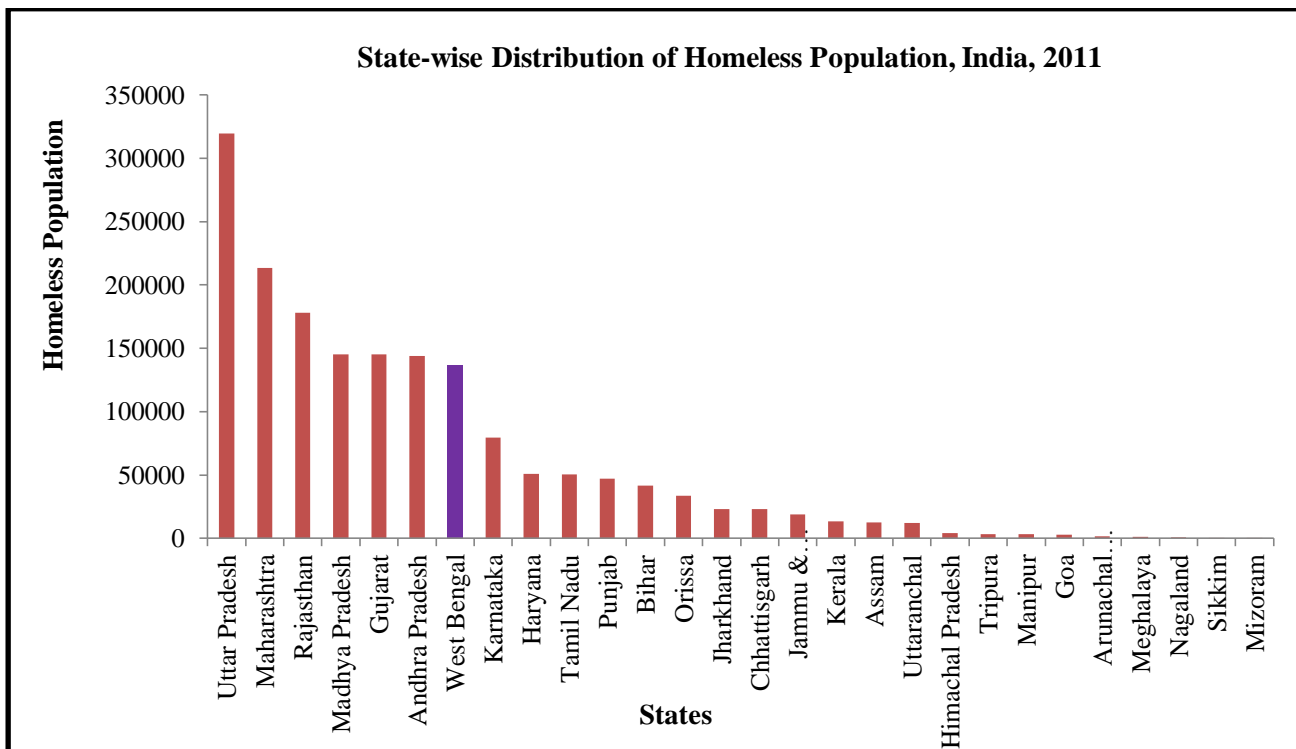


Fig: 2

Source: Census of India, 2011

THE ORIGIN AND MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM IN CONTEXT OF THE EVOLUTION OF THE STUDY AREA:

The phenomenon of pavement dwelling is probably as old as the city itself. The City of Kolkata, which started its journey in 1690 with the amalgamation of three villages i.e. *Sutanuti*, *Gobindpur* and *Kalikata*, has been grown into a principal center of economy, culture and administration mainly by the colonial rulers within a very short period. The flourishing metropolis attracted millions of skilled and unskilled labourers from the adjoining districts and states simultaneously and resulted a massive increment in population from 0.8 million in 1911 to 4.49 million in 2011.

Such exodus of migrants has widened the gap between demand and supply of urban housing, which gradually enhanced the phenomenon of pavement dwelling. Along with the rapid urbanization, the city experienced a boom of refugees from the East Pakistan (Now Bangladesh) for nearly four decades from the Partition of British India up to the creation of independent Bangladesh. Nearly six million refugees have come over to West Bengal in different waves up to 1971 and nearly 2 million refugees used to reside in Calcutta Municipal District Area in 1973 which constitutes almost 26% of the total population (CMDA, 1976); (Som, 1987). Such large scale international migration along with changing cause, character, scale and impact turned Kolkata from the ‘city of migrants’ to the ‘city of refugees’ in the post independent era (Chatterjee, 1990), which have experienced an acute situation associated with homelessness. The population of the poor is growing at twice the national rate in the city (Bela Bhattacharya, 1996). In absence of proper historical records on pavement dwelling in the city, estimation about the actual figure of those people is really difficult. They were recorded as ‘houseless people’ in the Census and without any ‘residence’ numbers (Mukherjee, 1975). However, exact identification of pavement dwellers is almost impossible owing to their shifting character from place to place combined with their fear for eviction by the civic authorities (Roy Chowdhury, 1999).

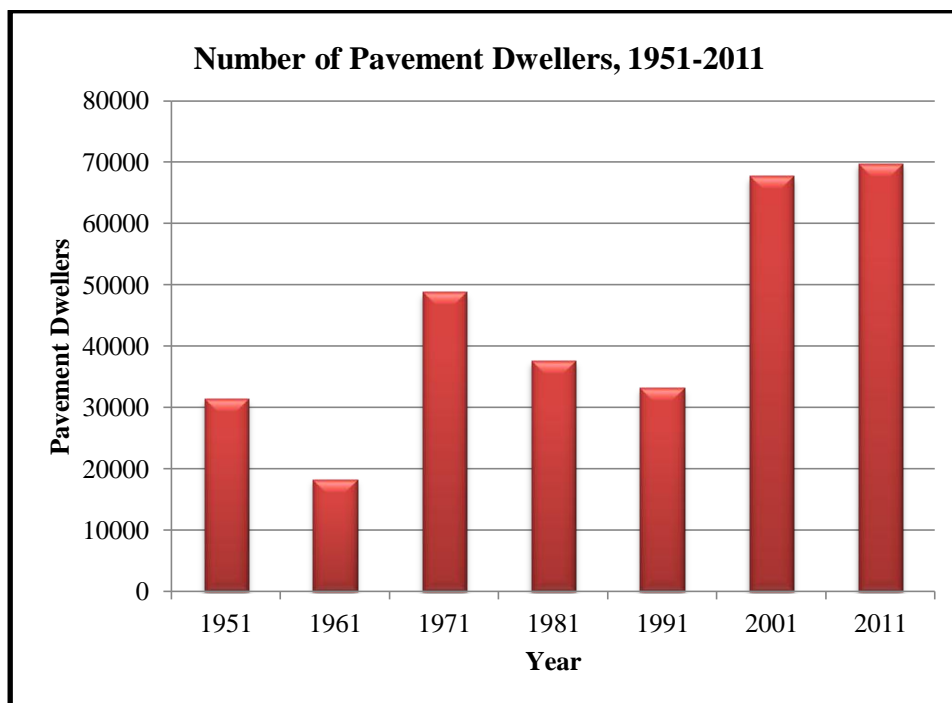


Fig: 3

Source: Census of India, 1951- 2011

A survey reveals that the total number of pavement dwellers was 48,802 in 1971, 34,316 in 1980-81 and 55,571 in 1987; out of which 55,005 were residing within the old Calcutta Corporation Area (KMDA, 1987; Jagannathan and Halder, 1988; Mukherjee, 1975). Now there are 69,798 houseless people comprising 1.55% of the total population who passes their days on the streets (Census, 2011). Among 141 wards of the KMC, homeless people are found in 118 wards, and rest 23 wards are free of homeless people. Maximum concentration is found in and around the CBD area of the city and in the areas of Burrabazar, Posta, Esplanade, Sealdah Railway station area, Binoy-Badal-Dinesh Bag area etc.

Table 2: District-wise Distribution of Houseless People, West Bengal, 2011

Name of the District	Number	Share in State's total (%)	Rank	Name of the District	Number	Share in State's total (%)	Rank
Kolkata	69798	52.07	1	Nadia	2957	2.21	11
North 24 Pgs.	9122	6.81	2	Birbhum	2917	2.18	12
Uttar Dinajpur	8251	6.16	3	Jalpaiguri	1924	1.44	13
Haora	5699	4.25	4	Bankura	1925	1.44	14
South 24 Pgs.	5436	4.06	5	PurbaMedinipur	1720	1.28	15
Barddhaman	5057	3.77	6	Purulia	1587	1.18	16
Hugli	3969	2.96	7	Darjiling	1559	1.16	17
PaschimMedinipur	3768	2.81	8	DakshinDinajpur	868	0.65	18
Murshidabad	3460	2.58	9	Cooch Behar	700	0.52	19
Maldah	3323	2.48	10	West Bengal	134040	100	

Source: Census of India, 2011

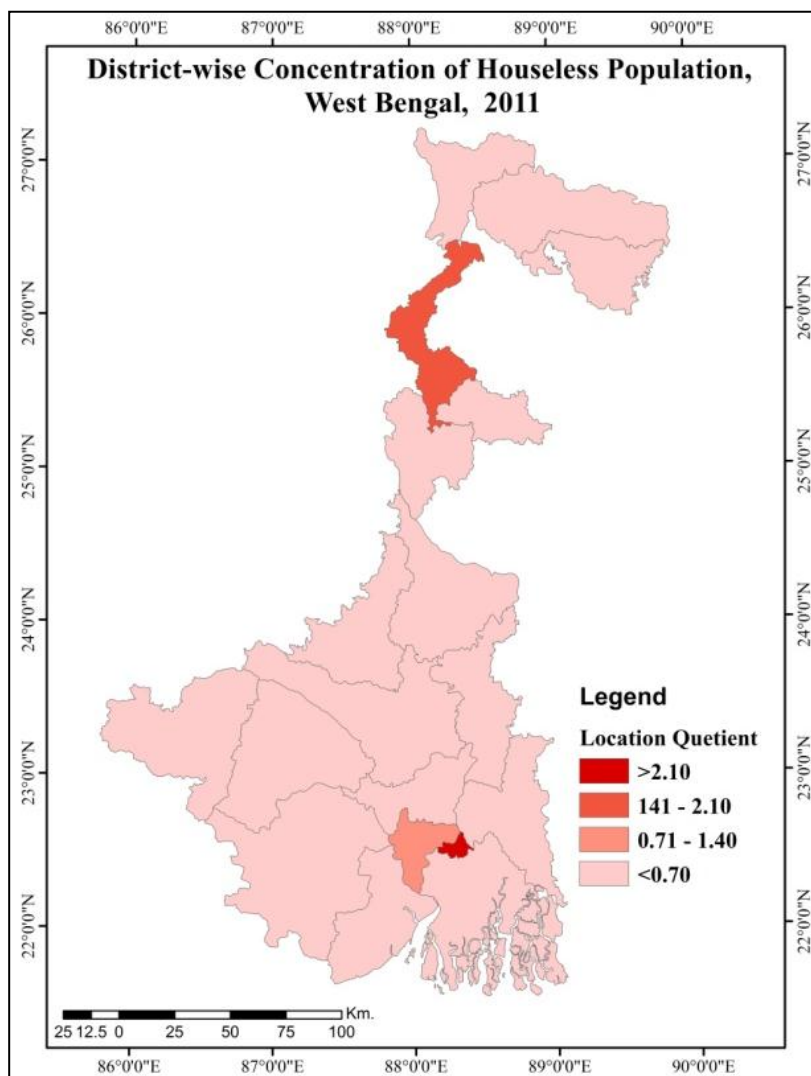


Fig: 4

Data Source: Computed by the authors

Sivaramkrishnan and Mondal (2014) have identified three types of homelessness in Kolkata:

- a) **The Floating Homeless/Pavement Dwellers** are those who do not have a roof over their head and live on streets, pavements, public spaces without a permanent shelter and may live with or without their family.
- b) **The situated homeless** are those who live in a makeshift or semi permanent shelter on a particular space or and illegally occupy public land. They do not have ideal shelter and are often called as the ‘squatters’ in India and in Kolkata.
- c) **The Potential Homeless** are those living in slums on sharing basis and may be asked to move out any day and thus become shelterless again.

CAUSES OF PAVEMENT DWELLING:

There are diverse and multifaceted socio-economic and political reasons which force an individual or a group of individuals to live in the streets. Large scale immigration with unavailability and inaffordability of houses is the prime cause of pavement dwelling in urban areas. The main causes may be summarized as below:

Migration: Large scale migration, either rural to urban or urban to urban, is the most important cause of pavement dwelling. Millions of rural folk forced by various socio-economic and political ‘push’-‘pull’ factors, have migrated towards the urban centers. But they are compelled to reside on footpaths and pavements of cities due to inadequate job facility, insufficient income and housing infrastructure. Kolkata has experienced a continuous inflow of migrants owing to the changing political and economic situation and absence of an alternative way of survival in the rural areas. Increasing disparity in the development of rural-urban areas, landlessness, surplus labour in agricultural sector and less job opportunities are some of the prime factors that create an influx of migrants towards the city. The city has experienced illegal

cross-border migration throughout the pre- and post-independent periods due to its close proximity to the international border of Bangladesh. Besides, incoming of people as informal labourers from neighbouring States like Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha and from surrounded Districts like Nadia, North and South 24 Parganas etc. increases the population burden of the city. Primary survey shows that nearly 44.36% respondents migrate from Bihar, 26.47% from Uttar Pradesh, 11.69% from Odisha whereas nearly 7.48% homeless people have been migrated from other districts of West Bengal (Fig: 7).

Poverty: Poverty is a multifaceted concept that includes social, economic and political tings and may be defined as the ‘absence of a sufficient level of fundamental entitlements such as the right to access essential goods’ (Sen, 1981). It is a condition in which a person or community lacks the financial capacity and essentials to meet the basic needs and to maintain a minimum standard of life and well-being normally followed in society. The urban poor community has no other alternative but to reside on the pavements. Some informal workers earn sufficient money, but have to send lion’s share of his income to their families living in the native place and live in the footpaths to minimize his/her daily expenditure.

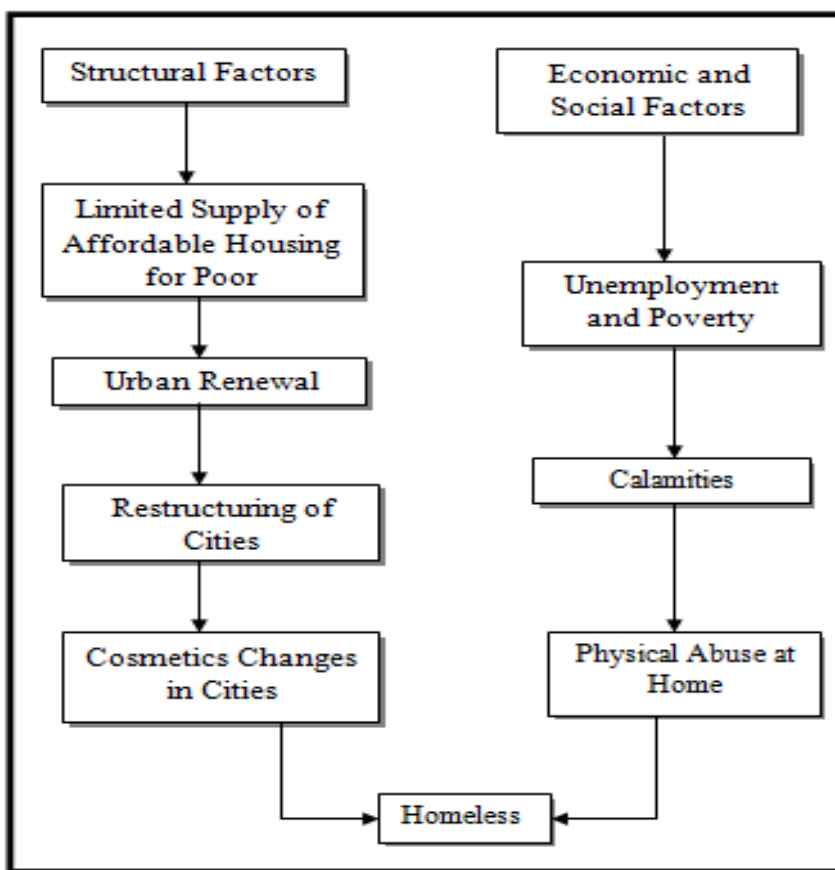


Fig: 5 Path of Homelessness

Source: Sivaramakrishnan and Mondal, 2014

Unemployment/Underemployment and Insufficient Income Supports:

The rural people, who have migrated towards the city in search of better job, often fail to get a dignified job due to their unskilled and illiterate nature combined with the city’s limited capacity to generate job opportunities. So, the disjunct people remain jobless or are generally involved in low paid economic activities. The lack of monetary resources makes them unable to afford a shelter by paying the rent or initial security deposit (Kar, 2016, SPARC, 1985). The poor people cannot even meet their utmost basic necessities such as food or cloth owing to insufficient income, affording a house is just a luxury for them.

Inadequacy of Housing Infrastructure: Massive inflow of migrants cannot be accommodated by the present housing capacity of the city that obviously increases the magnitude of homelessness in an urban area (Kumuda, 2014); (Basu, 2016); (SPARC, 1985). 33% of the total population live in their own houses within the city core (KMC Area) and nearly 51% live in rented houses; 49% houses are one-roomed while 8% of the houses have five or more rooms (Mukhopadhyay, 2006).

Physical Disability or Mental Illness:

It has been observed during the field work that many physically disabled and mentally retarded persons spend their night under open sky as vagabond. The disabled people are often treated as a burden of the family due to economic or psychological reasons. They are not given proper care and even ousted from the family and compelled to stay on roadside pavements without any security.

Guardian less Children / Orphans:

Gurdianlessness is one of the prime factors responsible behind the presence of large number of homeless child or street children. The orphans do not have any shelter or economic base and reared up in the footpaths without any parental care and family bond.

Displacement:

Large scale displacement of human settlement in source regions due to natural calamity or any other reasons produce a migrant stream towards urban centers (destination region) with destitute condition without any economic base. This bulk of rural poor are compelled to congregate in the footpaths of a city as homeless people.

Other:

Apart from the above mentioned factors, political instability, social crisis/tension and exclusion are some other responsible factors of shelterlessness. Domestic violence, death of husband, birth of girl child, sexual assault and family breakdown are some major causes of homelessness of women. Age may be considered as an important factor of homelessness both for children as well as for older persons of above 60 years of age. Poor elderly persons have experienced greater challenges in maintaining basic life support systems including shelter and forced to live on footpaths without any roofs (Nooe and Patterson, 2010).

LIFESTYLE OF THE HOMELESS PEOPLE:

Very little information is available on the living experience, strategy of survival and social structure or relationship of homeless people in towns and cities in India. As the urban people as well as the authority have ignored the existence of the community, their socio-economic lifestyle is retained behind the veil of ignorance.

Demographic Profile:

Nearly 70,000 people are living in shelterless condition in which male-female percentage are 78.30% and 21.69% respectively (Census 2011). Male population has been increased from 51531 in 2001 to 54658 in 2011 whereas female population has been declined from 16145 to 15140 during the last decade (2001-2011). Presence of the significant size of single male people indicates the male dominance among migrants, following the age-sex selective nature of migration. Despite of the fact, presence of significant share of child population indicates that families constitute the major demographic group among them (Jaganathan and Halder, 1989). Among the respondents, 73% are male and 27% are females. Almost 85% of respondents are Hindus in religious belief whereas, Muslims constitute 13% per cent and the remaining 2% belong to others category, including tribes. It has been found that, maximum number of Hindu pavement dwellers live everywhere of the studied area whereas concentration of Muslim homeless folks has been found in the central part of the city. Marriage is common among the pavement dwellers, though 48% respondents are still unmarried. Nearly 49.3 % respondents are married, whereas another 2.7 % are widowed. The age structure shows that 37.7 % are children in 0-14 year age group, 3% are aged people and 59.3 % are adults belonging to the 15-60 years age group (Primary Survey, 2017). Male and female in the working age group share almost equal proportion. Average family size of the pavement dwellers varies from 4 to 6 persons per family though high concentration of large household (47.65%) with more than seven members indicate high fertility rate with ignorance about birth control and family planning policies (Table: 3).

Table: 3Houseless Household by Household Size (No. of Person/household) in Kolkata

Household Size	1	2	3	4	5	6	7+	Mean
Number	1455	743	830	1146	1237	1002	5837	5.7
Percentage	11.88	6.07	6.77	9.35	10.10	8.18	47.65	-

Source:Census of India, 2011

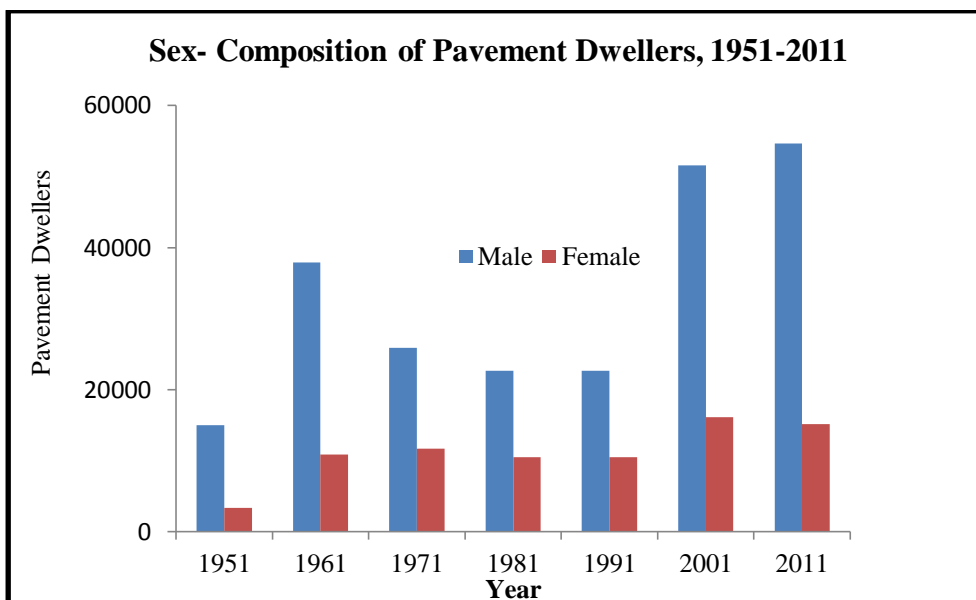


Fig: 6

Source: Census of India, 1951- 2011

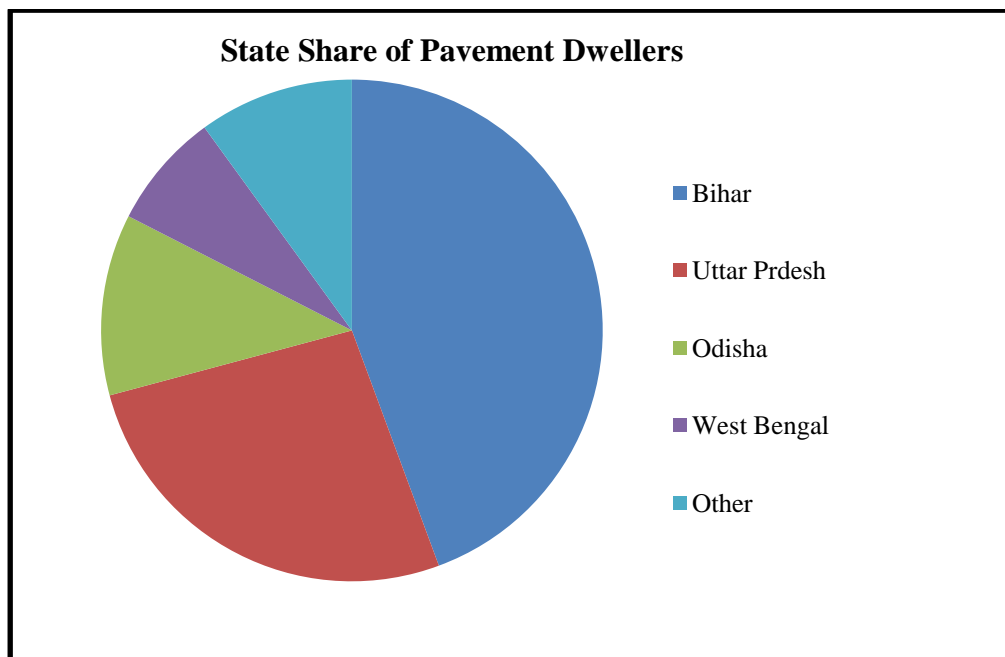


Fig: 7

Source: Primary Survey, 2017

Educational Status:

Primary survey reveals that the aged members of almost all the roadside dwelling families are illiterate and young children are beginners in most cases. They are compelled or sometimes more interested to send their children for begging or any other occupation to earn money rather than knowledge. Sometimes few families admit their children at the primary and post-primary level but later most of them are dropped out mainly for economic hardships of the family. Primary survey reveals that nearly 61.8% respondents are illiterate (Fig: 8). The Census reports show that, the rate of literacy has been increased from 2001 to 2011 with a very slow rate of 0.54%. Male literacy has been increased with a rate of 0.56%, whereas female literacy rate has been increased with 0.48% within the period (Fig: 9). Moreover, the status of women education is seriously lagging far behind although ‘a few girls are pursuing college education helped by charitable forum under the supervision of Christianconvent education system’ (Dey & Majumdar, 2015).

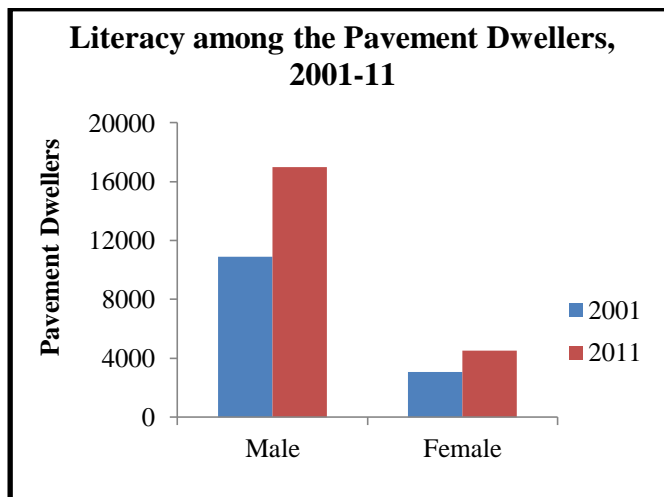


Fig: 8 Source: Primary Survey, 2017

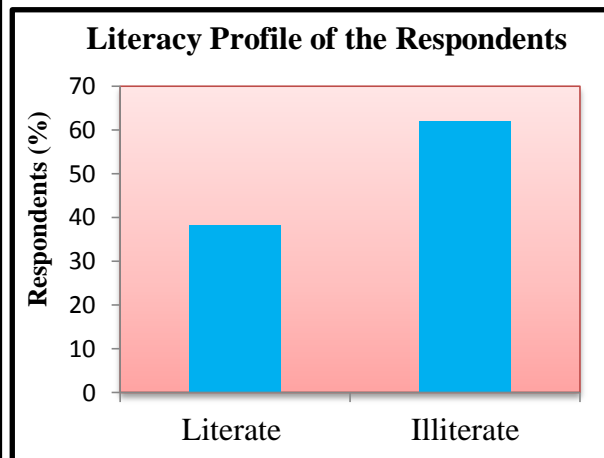


Fig: 9 Source: Census of India, 2001 and 2011

Economic Profile:

Family income of the pavement dwellers is extremely low as ‘almost 50% of them earn less than 100 rupees per day’ (Bhattacharya, 2012); (Dey & Majumdar, 2015). Primary survey shows that nearly 51% of the respondent’s families earn `150-200 per day, whereas another 7% families earn less than `100 per day (Fig: 11). Despite their low income status, they can’t enjoy the benefit of public distribution system as maximum of them don’t have Ration Cards or even not enlisted in BPL category. Among the surveyed people, only 1% have BPL card and 33% have Ration Card. A very little difference has been found in work participation rate as both male and female persons have engaged in diversified, informal and low paid unorganized economic activities such as rag, paper and bottle picking, begging, maid servant, wage labour, rickshaw puller, vegetable vendors, porting, masonry, sweeping, hawkery, catering, poster pasting, helper, cobbler (more specifically shoe-polisher), coolie, and handcart puller etc. (Fig: 10). They like to work near to the place of their stay and are strongly unwilling to travel further outside Kolkata in search of job. As a result, more than half of them reside in and around the Central Business District (CBD) area of the City (Jagannathan and Haldar, 1988 and 1989).

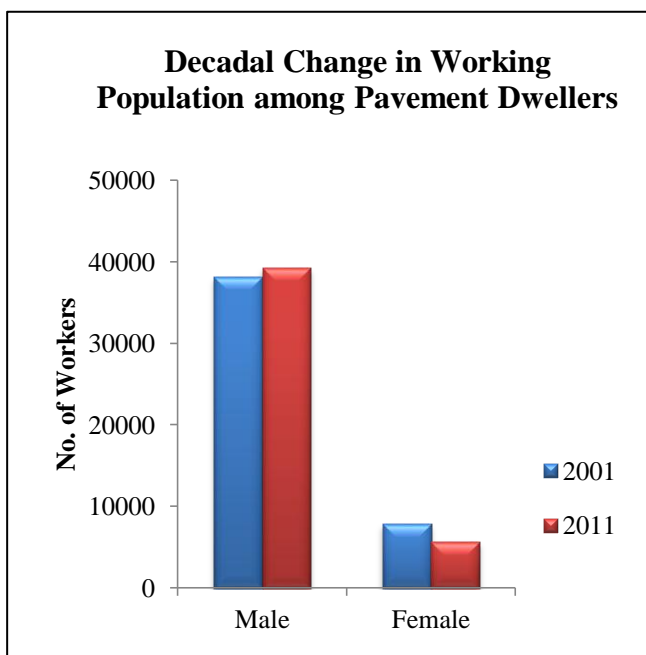


Fig: 9 Source: Census of India, 2001 and 2011`

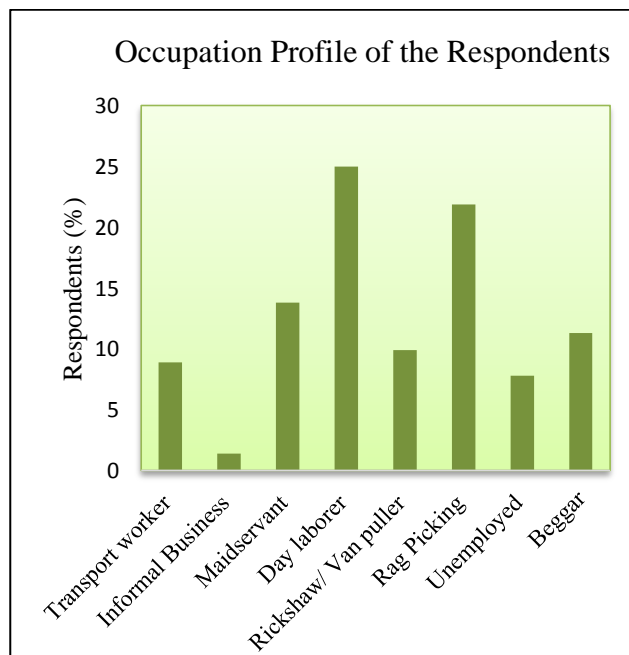


Fig: 10 Source: Primary Survey, 2017

Source: Primary Survey, 2017

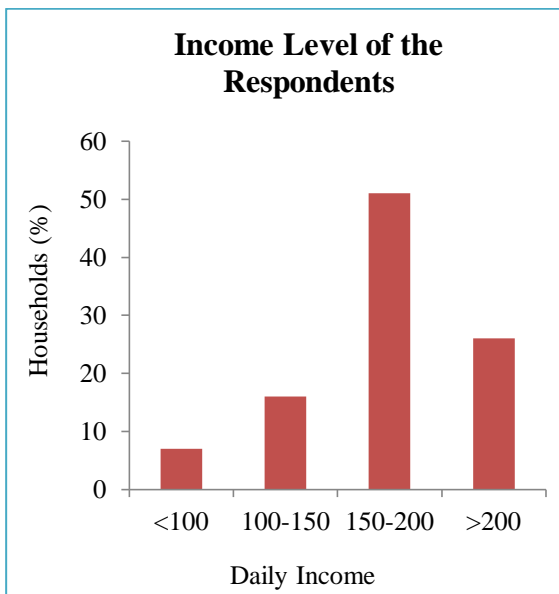


Fig: 11 Source: Primary Survey, 2017

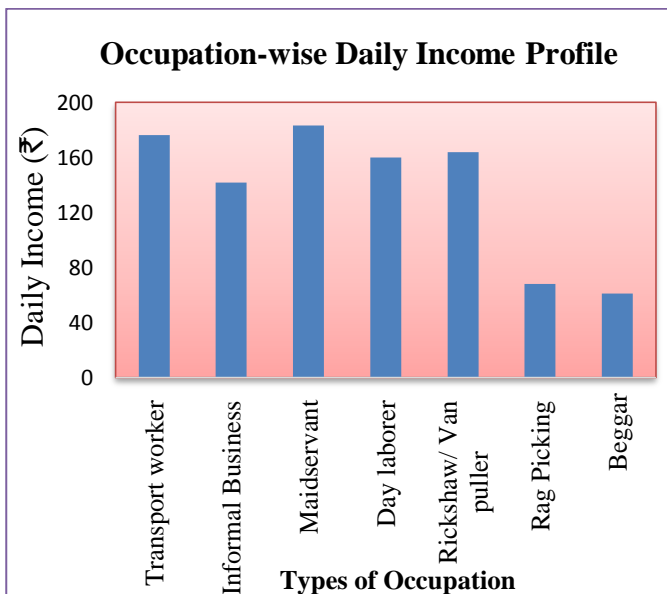


Fig: 12 Source: Primary Survey, 2017

INFRASTRUCTURE AND AMENITIES:

The pavement dwellers live a vulnerable life in the open road side, on pavements, in large unused sewage pipes, under flyovers and bridges, at courtyards of the religious places, on railway platforms without any municipal address. Drinking water is collected from public sources like municipal taps etc. They are compelled to use Public Toilet ('Pay and Use' sanitation system) for taking bath and to avail toilet and latrine facilities.

They also lack minimum basic household amenities such as warm clothes for winter season, alternative clothes in case of wet or dry, bed and mattress, mosquito net, cooking utensils, trunk to keep important documents or items safe, furniture for household purpose, sanitary items for personal cleanliness, radio for entertainment and mobile phone for communication. Most of the families claimed maximum unavailability of the basic amenities considered for the primary survey. Warm clothes, alternate clothes, mosquito net and a few cooking utensils are some common basic household amenities found in their makeshift houses. Mobile phone, as a useful electronic gadget is used by the pavement dwellers as nearly 63% pavement dwellers have mobile phones (Fig: 13).

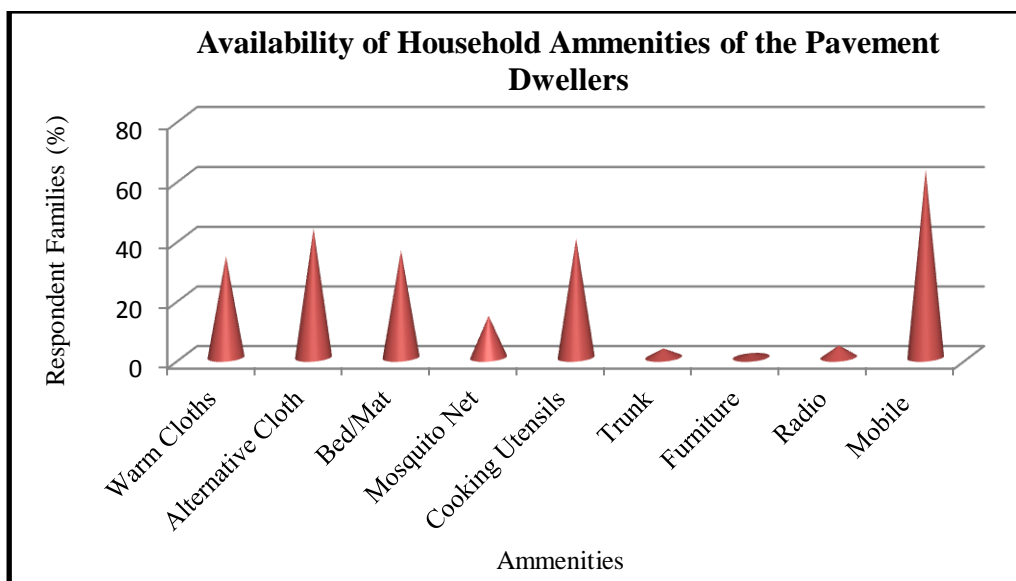


Fig: 13 Source: Primary Survey, 2017

Problems:

Homeless people face various problems associated with seasonal change of atmospheric attributes, crisis of drinking water, inadequate sanitation and housing facilities, low income, police harassment, belongings stolen, inter-family feud etc. The urban administrative authority, elite class resident as well as the pedestrians often

consider them as illegal encroacher and also argued against their illegal congestion. Sometimes they have to offer bribes or other kind of services to the shop keepers, local power leader or police to allow them to stay on road (Ghosh, 2014); (Adhikari, 2014). They often termed as ‘invisible population’ as they do not have the Voter’s Card, BPL Card, Ration Card, access to banking facilities or ATM card etc. (Sivaramakrishnan & Mondal, 2014). Among the surveyed people, only 43% have the Voter ID. The city dwellers have often branded them as ‘untrustworthy’ or ‘lazy’ but have also engaged them as domestic labour (in Bengali *Kajerlok*) with low economic pay and often they are purportedly considered to be thieves. This unprivileged group is not even enlisted as beneficiaries of urban social security schemes. Girls of growing ages and adolescence periods are forced to live on roads unsafe with high vulnerability of rape, molestation or eve-teasing. In addition, unhygienic living and sanitation facility along with poor nutrition make harm to their health condition. Such deprivation often generates other problems among the sidewalk dwellers, such as crime, alcoholism, vandalism drug abuse, anti-social activities etc. (Dey & Majumdar, 2015).

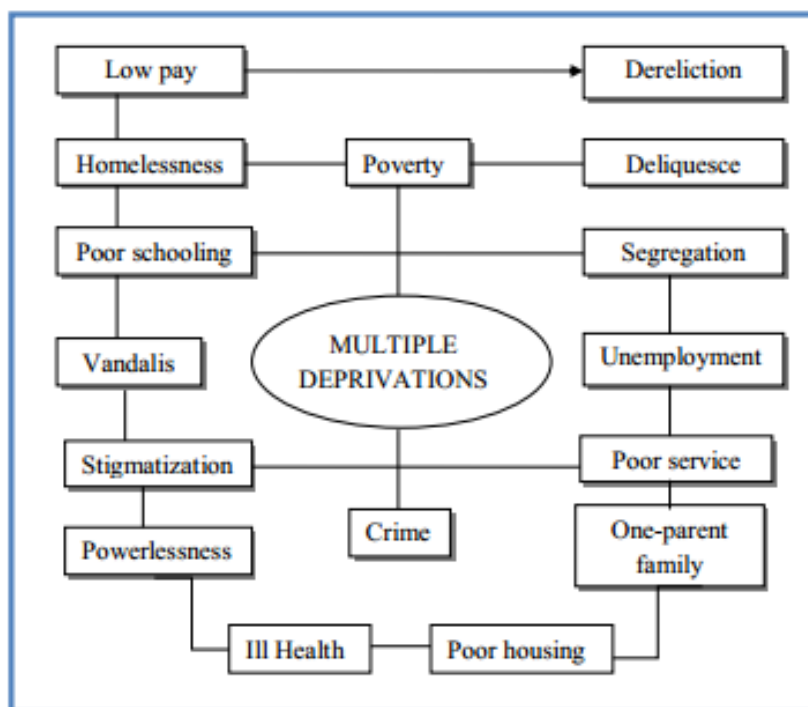


Fig. 14: Relationships between Deprivation, Poverty and Homelessness (after Mitchael Pacione) (Urban Geography, pp 310)

CONCLUSION:

The study reveals the harsh reality of the life of the pavement dwellers of the city. Though they are part of the urban sphere, but their existence is often denied by the urban society, administration as well as by the Union and respective State governments but their service to the urban folks as well as the flourishing urban economy as cheap labours for unpleasant jobs cannot be denied. The administrative machinery needs to pay proper attention and provide security and facilities to the socially excluded community of the urban society for their betterment and at the same time, it is more necessary to emphasize upon the root causes of their problems at the source regions to minimize the flow towards the cities. It is necessary to critically evaluate the different social security schemes or policies as a measure to uplift their existing standard of living and to solve the problem of pavement dwelling to some extent.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

The authors gratefully acknowledge the help and co-operation offered by the target population i.e. the pavement dwellers of the Kolkata city during the phase of empirical survey and primary data collection.



Pic: 1 Preparation of meal beside road



Pic: 2 A makeshift on footpath



Pic.3: Street children busy in playing



Pic. 4: Social Interaction among pavement dwellers

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