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Homelessness and the Lives We Learn Not to See

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Harsh Mander's essays document Indian cities' systemic abandonment of the homeless, tracing how the state criminalises deprivation rather than addressing it. Written without sentimentality, the book records both institutional cruelty and small acts of human kindness, asking the reader to think.

India's cities have always depended on people they do not wish to acknowledge. The men and women who carry bricks, push carts, clean streets, sort waste, and sleep under flyovers are not outside the city's life. They make that life possible. Yet the city sees them only in fragments: as labour when they are needed, as a nuisance when they rest, as an embarrassment when they become visible in too large numbers.

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It is this contradiction that Harsh Mander's *Under Grey Smoggy Skies* forces us to confront.

Many of the essays in this volume have appeared earlier in newspapers and on digital platforms. Read separately, they were powerful acts of witness. Read together, they become something larger and more difficult to ignore: a long, patient record of how Indian cities survive by normalising the abandonment of those who have no home in them. This is not only a book about homelessness. It is also a book about the moral life of the Indian city, about what the state sees, what it refuses to see, and what the rest of us have learned to step past without pausing.

Mander's gift as a writer has always lain in his refusal to turn suffering into spectacle. He writes with grief, but without sentimental excess; with anger, but rarely with loudness. That temperament serves this book well. The essays are peopled not by "the homeless" as a faceless category, but by men, women, and children who persist in memory because they are restored, line by line, to personhood.

Mohammad Abdul Kasim Ali Shaikh, the homeless rickshaw-puller who survives abuse, sex work, HIV, and decades of street life only to be crushed one night by a speeding vehicle as he sleeps on a road divider. Shahida, the deaf-mute girl at Hanuman Mandir in Delhi, sold by her mother to an older man who rapes her in exchange for money. Ratul, who leaves home at seven, finds his way to railway stations and rag-picking, and still has enough clarity to know that the pickpocket who protects him is the finest adult he knows. These are not decorative stories inserted to "humanise" a policy issue. They are the book's argument.

And that argument is more unsettling than it first appears. Mander shows, repeatedly, that homelessness in India is not merely the absence of shelter. It is a condition produced by a chain of expulsions, from home, from family, from livelihood, from social legitimacy, and then finally from the moral imagination of the state. The homeless are visible everywhere, but rarely recognised as people to whom the city also belongs.

One of the most powerful essays in the book is his open letter to the Supreme Court, written after judges hearing a petition on homeless shelters wondered whether the homeless were being turned into "parasites" through "freebies". Mander's response is restrained, but devastating. These are not parasites; they are the city's most persecuted workers, he writes. They gather at labour chowks every morning, selling their bodies for the hardest and dirtiest work on whatever terms they are offered. If they sleep rough, it is not because the state has been too kind to them, but because it has failed them so completely that even a roof becomes a matter of litigation.

That exchange sets the tone for much of what follows. Again and again, the book returns to the same official impulse: to misrecognise deprivation as choice, and vulnerability as nuisance. This is evident in the cruel history of anti-beggary laws, which Mander recounts not just as bad law, but as evidence of a deeper prejudice. Begging is not treated as the last desperate strategy of survival for the old, the disabled, the abandoned or the diseased. It is treated as delinquency, sometimes even as criminality. The state that has failed to secure even the bare conditions of dignified life then acquires the power to arrest and incarcerate those who stretch out a hand to live.

Mander is at his sharpest when he writes about how the law sees the poor. In the chapter on a Mumbai claims tribunal, he recounts a case in which compensation was reduced because the homeless man killed by a vehicle had been "negligent" in sleeping on the road. The tribunal's logic was impeccable in the abstract and morally absurd in reality. Roads are for traffic, not for sleeping. But where, Mander asks, are the homeless meant to sleep?

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The essay is not only about one bad order. It is about a legal imagination unable to register unequal lives. It is about the violence that hides inside apparently neutral reasoning, where the poor are assumed to err rather than endure. A constitutional scholar reading these pages cannot miss the deeper point: the promise of dignity becomes very thin when institutions charged with justice cannot see compulsion where they insist on seeing choice.

The book is equally strong when it turns to the state's welfare imagination. Few chapters are more revealing than those on shelters. At one level, Mander is fair. He recognises the Supreme Court's remarkable intervention in 2011-2012, when shelter was treated as part of the right to life and governments were directed to create homeless shelters. But the essays that follow show how swiftly that moral clarity withered in implementation.

Shelters were built, but often as cramped, filthy, punitive spaces. When large numbers of homeless persons refused to use them, the state did not ask what was wrong with the shelters. It launched "rescue" drives instead, coercing rough sleepers into institutional spaces they experienced not as refuge but as poorhouses.

The chapter on why Delhi's homeless preferred to sleep in the freezing cold rather than inside government shelters is one of the most illuminating in the book, because it reveals the distance between policy intention and lived reality. People avoided shelters for reasons that were coherent and practical: fear of theft, filth, disrespect, distance from work, lack of space for their carts or belongings, and the impossibility of sleeping there by day if they worked by night. Welfare failed because it began by denying the poor the authority to interpret their own lives.

This widening gap between state imagination and poor people's actual lives becomes catastrophic in moments of national crisis. Mander's essay on demonetisation is among the finest short pieces written on what that policy meant for those at the bottom. He does not write about macroeconomics or black money. He walks through labour markets and listens to men who worked through wedding nights only to be paid in suddenly worthless notes, then walked back to their sleeping places because buses would not take them, and then sold their wages at a discount in order to eat. That is the strength of this book: it restores political events to the scale at which they are actually lived.

The same is true of the extraordinary chapter on Yamuna Pushta during the lockdown. This is perhaps the emotional centre of the book. Over decades, thousands of single homeless men had created there a rough fraternity of the dispossessed. They shared food, work leads, medicines, dangers, and grief. Then came the lockdown, and with it, the collapse of labour, food supply, movement, and social trust.

Mander's account of hunger there is harrowing, but the real force of the essay lies in what it reveals about the state. The homeless are starved, policed, beaten, dispersed, loaded into buses, confined in institutions in the name of Covid safety, and punished collectively after unrest. In the end, some escape and hide in pipes and hollows by the riverbank. These pages do not merely document administrative failure. They record the spectacle of a state confronting the poor not first as citizens in distress, but as bodies to be controlled.

If one chapter captures the deep moral bleakness of the present moment, it is the elegy for the shelters demolished on the Yamuna's banks in 2023. These shelters had been created because the Supreme Court had once recognised that shelter is integral to the right to life. They were then razed, apparently to beautify the city for a global spectacle. The irony is brutal and exact. A constitutional right, once affirmed, is undone by bulldozers in the night. It is impossible not to read these pages as a commentary on New India's urban morality: the poor are tolerable as workers, intolerable as presence.

And yet, this would be an incomplete reading of the book if one saw in it only indictment. Some of its most moving pages are about kindness, small, improvised, local acts of care that arise not from policy but from recognition.

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The chapter on Ishwar Sankalpa's work with homeless mentally ill persons in Kolkata is especially memorable. A tea seller, a grain merchant, a barber, an information technology (IT) employee on a lunch break, ordinary people become, in effect, a care infrastructure where the formal one has collapsed. These essays could easily have tipped into a comforting faith in charity. They do not. Mander is too honest for that. Kindness matters in the book not because it solves structural injustice, but because it reveals how impoverished a society has become when such modest acts of recognition begin to feel extraordinary.

That, finally, is what this book leaves the reader with: not just sorrow, but shame. Shame that so much of this has become ordinary. Shame that men can die unnamed on roadsides, that women can fear shelters as much as streets, that children can grow into adulthood under open skies, that a city can prepare to host the world by first erasing the poor from sight. And also shame that those who live in houses know so little of the lives lived beside them.

In one of the most beautiful moments in the book, after watching *Slumdog Millionaire* with children once on the streets, Mander reflects on what they took from the film. Not the game show. Not the fantasy of sudden escape. What they remembered, he writes, was love, the possibility that someone might care enough to anchor a life that would otherwise drift toward crime, addiction or despair. That insight could stand, in some ways, for the whole book.

For all its critique of law, policy, and governance, *Under Grey Smoggy Skies* is finally a book about recognition. About whether we can still see, in the people sleeping on our pavements, not an urban inconvenience, not a failed citizen, not a blemish on the city's face, but a fellow human being whose life has equal worth. That is why the book matters. And that is why it is so difficult to look away from once one has read it.

The review is entirely my own in terms of ideas, arguments, and analysis. I did use AI tools in a limited way to refine language and improve clarity during drafting. The intellectual content and conclusions remain fully my own.

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