The city

is

our home

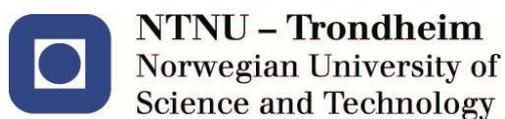**THE CITY IS OUR HOME**
The spatial dimensions of urban homelessness
Nizamuddin Basti, Delhi
Master Thesis
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*The Census of India defines the homeless as 'those living without a roof' using housing quality as the main criteria for definition. I have used this definition for my research. Poverty and vulnerability often underpin homelessness. Homeless is India fall below those loving in slums and are mostly perceived as transitional, unemployed and a burden on the society where they occupy space.

Urban homelessness is one the fastest growing and paradoxically least studied issues in the developing world. Conservative estimates suggest that there are at least 150,000 homeless in Delhi, India. As of 2010, the existing shelters in Delhi accommodated only around 10,000 homeless. Tough homelessness in India is largely caused by structural forces formed by the intersection of poverty with housing market deficiencies; it is dominantly viewed as a result of individual deficiencies of the homeless themselves. Social stigma exacerbates the condition of the homeless who constitute one of the most socio-economically vulnerable sections of urban society. Given the lack of permanent or temporary shelters for the homeless, urban space becomes the necessary setting and dominant context their lives. Yet right to access of space by homeless is rarely addressed in urban discourse and the presence of homeless is overwhelmingly perceived as negative by both society and authorities. My research explores the spatial dimensions of the urban homeless, with a focus on Delhi. The overall development objective was *to create urban environments that are socio-spatially inclusive of urban citizens including those who experience homelessness*. Studies of homelessness in India are rare and this lack of information hinders policy, especially given the social ostracism that homeless face. Furthermore as the rampant dislocation of the homeless during the Common Wealth Games, 2010 indicated most homeless are perceived as indifferent to the space they occupy. Compared to slum dwellers, the homeless are not even acknowledged as dislocated. There is no national policy to address homelessness and in 2010 following the deaths of many homeless people due to severe cold the Supreme Court of India directed the Government to frame policy on the homeless on priority. This research helps illustrate the spatial priorities and links of the homeless by throwing light on the largely unmapped and hidden world of the use and access space by homeless, thus acting as an important resource to policy makers. Homelessness and space thus define the scope of my enquiry. Using the case study method, I observed the homeless as spatial actors in the neighbourhood of Nizamuddin Basti, Delhi in relation to their socio spatial setting, taking into account the lack of shelter that differentiated them from other users. My main research question was '*What are the dimensions of spatial use and agency for the urban homeless?'* I answer this research question through the following sub questions a) *How do the homeless perceive space? How do their daily activities link them to the space they occupy? b) Who controls the spatial access of the homeless and how is this control enforced? c) What is the effect of spatial dislocation on the homeless?* This was the first instance of research on homeless that looked at them as a group of users with reference to a particular contained area. During two months I observed them almost daily and the impact of the Common Wealth Game related dislocation on their lives.

The research findings revealed that far from being indifferent to space they occupied, space was as a critical resource for the homeless. I used the term *anchors* as it suited the particular nature of spatial attachments of the homeless; it implied a spatial choice even while it acknowledged the temporal hold of their spatial links. These constitute *use based* physical anchors; *symbolic value* based social anchors as well as *strategic value based* economic anchors. The use of space was a conscious act in order to build better lives against odds, working against the authorities that control space. The findings revealed that authorities that are meant to protect the rights of the homeless actually inhibit their *agency* or ability to negotiate on their own behalf. Differentiating between enabling and constraining spaces, most homeless interventions including shelters were observed to be instruments to contain the homeless, rather than enable them. Rendered invisible, threatened and illegitimate, compounded by their extreme vulnerability and poverty the homeless had little basis, capacity or power to negotiate for control of their own spatial existence. The spatial agency of the homeless was mostly restricted to passive resistance - occupying spaces despite harassment, destruction of their belongings etc. or adaptation wherein they modified their behaviour or activities to adapt to spatial controls. Recording the impact that the disruption of spatial links on the homeless due to the urban renewal activities in Nizamuddin Basti I analysed the assets that spatial access grants the homeless - namely financial, human, natural, physical assets. I mapped the shift in these assets over time as impacted by the evictions of the homeless, compounded by extreme weather and stigma which provide the vulnerability context of the homeless in the Basti. As assets are interlinked, the disruption of the spatial links of the homeless also affected their other assets. Evicting the homeless from the Basti without alternatives contributed to entrenching the poverty and vulnerability of the homeless by devaluing the assets they had accumulated with great difficulty. Instead of enabling positive livelihood outcomes the transforming spatial structures pushed the homeless towards destitution proving counterproductive to the governments stated aim of inclusive growth

Theoretical implications of the research underlined the need to see the spatial mobility of the homeless in context of social mobility. Otherwise the homeless are perceived as indifferent to transience, which strengthens arguments that force them out of spaces without acknowledgement or compensation. Their mobility could be *induced* by lack of basic facilities but this mobility was based on *spatial knowledge and choice of the homeless*. This was an attempt by them to improve conditions. On the other hand mobility could be *forced when* the homeless had *no choice* but to move and *little knowledge* of how to adapt after moving. This mobility worsens the conditions of the homeless. A further implication for design of more integrated spaces is to discern whether the spaces play an enabling role towards a diverse group of users, especially the poor and the vulnerable. Spaces can be enabling or constraining based on the link between *individual need, spatial control strategies* and *attributes of space* rather than space itself. *Enabling Spaces* were inclusive creating conditions that at times brought together the homeless and non homeless in the case area. They afforded homeless a rare opportunity to integrate into the community of the Basti which they were a part of but largely excluded. This helped them access social and economic opportunities while keeping away the exploitative elements that preyed on them in constraining marginal spaces. Spatial anchors provided a means to enable spaces as they provide a safety net for those without shelter or with inadequate shelter. Existing spatial anchors need to be recognised and enhanced, not removed. Their disruption pushes the homeless further away from their personal developmental goals. An alternative approach to the existing approach of containing the homeless is to work towards constructive integration by providing them with multiple and flexible spatial choices and access to space in the city.

The study generated various practical implications for the agencies working with homelessness, chief being the need to see night shelters need to be seen in conjunction with space based interventions that promote integration of homeless in urban space and urban society using localised spatial information and sensitisation of local communities. Urban interventions need to be careful in considering who they exclude even while they employ 'inclusive' processes to avoid entrenching existing social biases against homeless. Public Infrastructure should account for the uses of the homeless. Even making small improvements in critical services by providing a network of spatial anchors that cater to the physical, social and economic needs can create considerable benefits at low costs to the homeless. Given their acute poverty and resourcefulness small but strategic improvements in basic infrastructure makes big differences to their well being. Homelessness is not a marginal phenomenon based on individual deficiencies but growing urban issue that many poorest urban dwellers are vulnerable to experiencing. The phenomenon of homelessness is symptomatic of the shifting urban paradigms in a globalised world. The challenges of homelessness provide pointers for planners towards more creating inclusive and productive cities as well as societies.