



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### CAUSE OF BEGGING AT URBAN AREAS OF KOLKATA: BASED ON CASE STUDIES

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#### ABSTRACT

Begging remains a persistent social issue in many urban areas of India, particularly around religious sites where almsgiving is a common practice. The present study explores the causes of begging among urban Beggars in Kolkata through a case study approach. Seven case studies were conducted among Beggars residing around selected Temples and Mazars of Kolkata. The findings reveal that begging is often the outcome of multiple interconnected factors such as poverty, old age, widowhood, family neglect, unemployment, disability, gender-based discrimination, exploitation, and intergenerational transmission of begging as a livelihood strategy. The study further highlights the role of religious places as both economic and psychological support systems for marginalized individuals. The results suggest that begging should be understood as a consequence of structural vulnerabilities rather than individual choice alone. Effective interventions require comprehensive social security measures, elderly welfare programs, gender-sensitive rehabilitation and improved livelihood opportunities for vulnerable populations.

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## INTRODUCTION

Begging is a complex social phenomenon that reflects broader issues of poverty, inequality, social exclusion, and inadequate social protection. Despite economic development and urbanization, a considerable number of individuals in India continue to depend on alms for their survival. The visibility of Beggars is particularly high around religious institutions, where charitable giving is encouraged by religious beliefs and cultural traditions. The causes of begging are multidimensional and often extend beyond simple economic deprivation. Factors such as unemployment, old age, physical disability, chronic illness, family disintegration, widowhood, migration and lack of educational opportunities frequently contribute to an individual's entry into begging. In many cases, begging emerges as a survival strategy adopted when conventional sources of livelihood become inaccessible. For some individuals, it represents the final outcome of prolonged social and economic marginalization, while for others it may become an inherited occupation transmitted across generations. Previous studies conducted in India and other countries have identified a variety of determinants associated with begging. Researchers have highlighted the influence of poverty, unemployment, family breakdown, social neglect and inadequate welfare support on the growth of begging populations. However, statistical surveys often fail to capture the personal experiences, social relationships and life events that shape an individual's pathway into begging. Understanding these lived experiences is essential for

developing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. The present study adopts case study approach to explore the causes of begging among selected urban Beggars in Kolkata. By examining individual life histories, the study seeks to identify the social, economic, cultural and familial factors that contribute to begging. Special attention is given to the experiences of Beggars residing around religious places, where the interaction between faith, charity and survival creates a unique social environment. Through these case studies, the research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the diverse pathways leading to begging and to contribute to discussions on social welfare, rehabilitation, and poverty alleviation policies. Research on Beggars has primarily focused on their socio-economic conditions, causes of begging and patterns of social exclusion. Several investigations conducted in different countries have highlighted the complex factors associated with begging and the challenges faced by this marginalized population. In Nigeria, Salami and Olugbayo (2013) conducted a cross-sectional study among 250 migrant Beggars in Ibadan. Their findings revealed that malaria was one of the most common health problems experienced by the participants both in Nigeria and in their countries of origin. The study further demonstrated that treatment-seeking behavior was significantly influenced by sex and country of origin, while financial constraints and legal barriers limited access to healthcare services. A study conducted in Central Tanzania by Namwata et al. (2012) examined 130 street Beggars and classified them into different categories based on

their sleeping arrangements and family connections. The authors identified poverty, unemployment, physical disability, parental loss, and family disintegration as major factors contributing to street begging. Ahamadi (2010) investigated the characteristics of Beggars and public attitudes toward begging in the city of Shiraz. The study provided important insights into the social perception of begging and the demographic characteristics of individuals engaged in this activity. In India, scholarly attention to begging dates back several decades. Gore et al. (1959), in their study of the begging problem in metropolitan Delhi, argued that begging was deeply rooted in broader socio-economic inequalities. They suggested that effective solutions required not only local interventions but also expanded social welfare services and increased employment opportunities. Research conducted in Aligarh by Menka et al. (2014) reported significant spatial variations in the socio-economic conditions of urban Beggars. Individuals residing in central and western regions of the district exhibited poorer socio-economic conditions than those living in the south-eastern areas. In a related study, Menka and Hasan (2013) examined socio-economic determinants, disease prevalence, and adverse lifestyle practices among Beggars, while also proposing measures to address these issues. Jha (1979) explored the lives of Beggars and lepers in the pilgrim town of Puri, focusing on their social organization, cultural identity, and everyday challenges. Similarly, Chaudhuri (1987) carried out an ethnographic study of the Beggars of Kalighat, providing valuable insights into their socio-cultural environment. The issue of begging has also been examined in relation to homelessness and unemployment. Malik (2012) argued that anti-begging legislation often fails to address the root causes of begging and may undermine the efforts of organizations working with homeless populations. Earlier, Kumarappa (1945) presented a comprehensive analysis of begging from multiple disciplinary perspectives, emphasizing the need for a holistic understanding of the problem. Studies conducted by Ratan (1961) in Kanpur and Rao and Bogaert (1970) in Ranchi further highlighted the socio-economic background and living conditions of Beggars in different urban settings.

**Aim and Objective:** This research intends to find out the cause of begging among the urban Beggars of the religious places.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study was conducted on the Beggars of Mazars (Namely Syed Shah Baba Mazar, Satti Peer Mazar, Bagdadi Shah Baba Mazar) and Temple areas (Namely Dakshineswar Temple, Kalighat Kali Temple, Hanuman Temple Dumdum) of Kolkata, West Bengal, India. The present study was done by using case study method. A total of 7 (seven) case studies, from different religious places and different religions were included in the present study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Case Study 1:** Satyabala Midya (70 years) (Name changed)

**Begging Place:** Dakshineswar

Satyabala originally belonged to Naihati, where she lived with her parents and three younger siblings. Being the eldest daughter of the family, she grew up under strict family

supervision. At the age of fifteen, she developed a romantic relationship with a local boy named Nitai Das (name changed). When her parents discovered the relationship, they strongly objected to it. She was confined inside the house and was not allowed to meet him anymore. After a few days, with the assistance of her siblings, Satyabala managed to escape from home and eloped with Nitai. The couple got married in a nearby temple. However, both families refused to accept the marriage and completely severed all relations with them. Soon after, they shifted to Kolkata and began living in a slum area. Nitai earned their livelihood by working as a daily wage laborer. Their life took a tragic turn when Nitai met with a severe accident that required expensive medical treatment. Satyabala approached both families for support, but neither side agreed to help them. Desperate to save her husband, she borrowed money from a local moneylender. Despite all her efforts, Nitai passed away after the operation. Unable to repay the debt, Satyabala became trapped in a vulnerable situation and was eventually forced into a red-light area by the moneylender. She spent nearly thirty years there against her wishes. According to her account, leaving that environment was almost impossible before reaching menopause. After many years, she finally left that place and came to Dakshineswar. She now spends her life begging near the temple of Goddess Ma Bhabatarini, believing that staying in the holy place will bring her spiritual peace and relief from the painful memories of her past.

**Case Study 2:** Bhabaranjan Ghosh (75 years) (Name changed)  
**Begging Place:** Kalighat

Bhabaranjan Ghosh was originally from Halisahar. He lost both of his parents at a young age and became responsible for raising his younger brothers and sisters. Although he had completed his matriculation, financial hardship forced him to work from an early age. He earned money through private tuition and various small jobs to support the family. With his efforts, his younger siblings were able to continue their education and eventually complete college. Later, his brothers secured office jobs and his sisters got married. After years of struggle and sacrifice, Bhabaranjan built a house for the family. However, he did not register the property in his own name. As time passed, his brothers also got married and family relationships gradually changed. Due to old age, Bhabaranjan could no longer work and contribute financially as he had done earlier. His siblings became indifferent towards him and eventually neglected him completely. Feeling unwanted in his own home, he left the family house and moved to Kalighat. With no stable source of income or social support, he finally started begging near the temple premises to survive.

**Case Study 3:** Nirmala Maiti (69 years) (Name changed)

**Begging Place:** Hanuman Mandir, Dumdum

Nirmala Maiti was a resident of Kalyani. She lived with her husband and daughter in a financially modest household. Her husband worked as a daily laborer, while she managed the household responsibilities. Their lives became difficult after her husband passed away at the age of forty-five. Following his death, Nirmala began working as a domestic helper in different houses to support herself and her daughter. Despite financial hardship, she arranged her daughter's marriage when she turned sixteen. After her daughter's marriage, Nirmala continued working alone for many years. However, increasing age and physical weakness gradually made it impossible for

her to continue household work. Later, her daughter and son-in-law took her into their home. Even though they provided shelter and care, Nirmala did not want to depend entirely on them for her personal expenses. Since she was no longer physically capable of working, she started begging near the Hanuman Temple at Dumdum. Through begging, she tries to maintain a sense of self-dependence and also contributes financially, in a small way, to her daughter's family.

**Case Study 4:** Salima Bibi (Name changed)

**Begging Place:** Mazar Area

Salima Bibi belonged to Murshidabad. She lived with her husband, in-laws, and four daughters. She had never received formal education and spent most of her life as a homemaker. Her married life became extremely difficult because she did not have a son. Due to patriarchal family attitudes, her husband and in-laws blamed and mistreated her. Eventually, she was forced to leave the house along with her daughters, and her husband remarried. At that time, her parents had already passed away, and her brothers were unwilling to take responsibility for her and her children. With no family support, Salima sought help from people from Murshidabad who were working in Kolkata. Seeing her difficult condition, they allowed her to stay with them. After coming to Kolkata, Salima worked in different occupations such as domestic work and assisting construction workers. She struggled for years to raise her daughters, who are now all married. Due to old age and declining physical strength, she can no longer continue hard labour. Not wanting to become a burden on anyone, she now begs near the Mazar to meet her daily needs.

**Case Study 5:** Munni Das (33 years) (Name changed)

**Begging Place:** Syed Shah Baba Mazar

Munni Das grew up near the Syed Shah Baba Mazar along with her family. Her parents were also Beggars, and from childhood she became familiar with the practice of begging in the Mazar area. Since many visitors regularly came there, begging gradually became a normal part of her daily life. At around fifteen or sixteen years of age, she got married to a local man named Badal Das (name changed). Shortly after the marriage, her husband migrated to another state for work and never returned. Following his disappearance, Munni became responsible for supporting herself. To earn a living, she now works as a domestic helper in three households. After completing her work, she spends the remaining time begging near the Mazar. Her parents and siblings are also engaged in begging, and the family considers it their traditional means of survival. For Munni, begging is not merely an individual occupation but part of a long-standing family livelihood strategy.

**Case Study 6:** Binod Paul (41 years) (Name changed)

**Begging Place:** Kalighat Temple Area

Binod Paul and his wife Lata had been living in the Kalighat area for more than twenty years. Both of them came from families where begging had continued across generations. During childhood, Binod lived on the footpath with his parents and began begging near the Kalighat Temple at an early age. Since large numbers of pilgrims visited the temple, young children often received more sympathy and donations. As Binod grew older, he attempted to work as a daily laborer. However, because he had no formal education, the only jobs

available to him involved physically exhausting labor. Over time, he realized that begging provided comparatively easier and more stable earnings than manual labor. In addition, he had developed habits of alcohol consumption and smoking, which increased his financial needs. Eventually, he gave up other forms of work and returned to begging full-time, continuing the occupation he had known since childhood. Later, his wife also joined him in begging to increase the household income.

**Case Study 7:** Sabitri Debi (78 years) (Name changed)

**Begging Place:** Hanuman Mandir, Dumdum

Sabitri Debi was originally from Bidhannagar, where she lived with her husband and specially abled son. Her husband worked in a jute mill, while she remained a homemaker. Their financial condition deteriorated suddenly when the jute mill declared a lockout. Soon afterwards, her husband died from a cardiac arrest. With limited savings and the additional burden of expensive medicines required for her son's treatment, Sabitri was forced to seek employment. She started working as a cook in several households to support the family. During this difficult period, many relatives distanced themselves from them and offered little support. Years later, due to old age and physical weakness, Sabitri became unable to continue her work. She now struggles even to stand properly for long periods. As a result, she eventually began begging near the Hanuman Temple in Dumdum in order to survive and continue supporting her son.

(All names used in these case studies are fictional and have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.)

## DISCUSSION

The Socio-Economic Drivers and Vulnerability Landscapes of Begging in West Bengal. The collected case studies offer a poignant, multi-dimensional view of the phenomenon of begging in urban West Bengal. By analyzing these narratives, one can move beyond the simplistic categorization of begging as merely a result of individual choice or moral failing. Instead, these case studies reveal a complex interplay of systemic failure, lifecycle vulnerability and entrenched socio-economic realities.

The Typology of Vulnerability: The individuals profiled can be broadly categorized into three distinct, albeit sometimes overlapping, progression of entry into begging:

The "Life-Course" Vulnerable (The Elderly): For subjects like Bhabaranjan, Sabitri and Nirmala, begging is the final resort following a lifetime of labor and family sacrifice. Their trajectory is marked by the erosion of traditional safety nets, namely, familial support systems. This reflects a crisis in elder care where the transition from "provider" to "dependent" is met with indifference or abandonment, leaving them with no social security, pension or institutional support. The Systemically Marginalized (Gender and Structural Oppression): Satyabala and Salima's cases underscore how gendered vulnerability, compounded by tragedy, lack of legal protection, and patriarchal abandonment, forces individuals into precarious survival strategies. Satyabala's trajectory, in particular, highlights the intersection of debt, exploitation, and the long-term trauma of coerced environments, showing how historical

victimization continues to dictate economic survival decades later. The Intergenerational Practitioners: In the cases of Munni and Binod, begging is not an event of total collapse but a normalized economic strategy. Having been born into families where begging was the primary livelihood, they demonstrate how limited access to education, formal labor markets, and the socialization of begging create an intergenerational cycle that is difficult to break.

Main observations

### The Myth of "Choice"

While Binod's narrative mentions a preference for begging over manual labor due to physical exhaustion and habituation, this "choice" must be contextualized. Without formal education or skill development, the alternative is grueling, low-paying, and unstable labor. In this context, begging is a rational, albeit desperate, adaptation to a labor market that offers no dignity or security to the unskilled or the elderly.

### The Role of Sacred Spaces

The prevalence of Temples, Mazars and holy sites as the primary geography of these individuals' lives is significant. These spaces are chosen not only for the density of potential donors but also as sites of psychological refuge. For the elderly, these sites provide a sense of spiritual continuity and community, offering a modicum of dignity that is missing in their fractured domestic lives.

### The Failure of Social Capital

A consistent thread across all seven cases is the exhaustion of social capital. Whether it is relatives refusing support (Bhabaranjan, Sabitri), the absence of family (Salima), or the loss of a primary breadwinner (Nirmala), the breakdown of the household unit is the catalyst for begging. The state is conspicuously absent in these narratives, suggesting that the "safety net" for these citizens has shifted entirely onto the shoulders of religious institutions and the charity of the public.

## CONCLUSION

These case studies challenge the prevailing societal stigma that reduces begging to laziness. For some, it is a survival mechanism necessitated by the absence of a social welfare state; for others, it is an ancestral occupation ingrained by systemic poverty. Any policy intervention aiming to address this issue must focus on:

**Institutional Social Security:** Targeted support for the elderly who lack family backing.

**Gender-Sensitive Rehabilitation:** Specialized care for women who have survived systemic exploitation.

**Skill Diversification:** Breaking the cycle for younger generations through education and alternative vocational pathways that offer more stability than the daily uncertainty of the streets.

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