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Destitutes in Chennai have a home

Pratiksha Ramkumar, TNN Nov 12, 2012, 02.12AM IST

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CHENNAI: At 7.30 on a Wednesday evening, people dining at an eatery on Santhome High Road were surprised to see a group of youngsters interacting with two men, who resembled beggars, giving them a food packet each. The youth are volunteers of Banyan, an NGO working with the mentally ill, who meet people living on the streets, like the two men, whom they try to convince to use the corporation's shelter in Dooming Kuppam.

Sathyanarayana, who runs a tyre puncture service on the Santhome High Road, has his mattress next to him. Once he shuts shop for the day, he spreads out the mattress and sleeps on the spot itself. Though he says he has two sons in Kolathur, he does not know how to contact them. "I had it all in a diary that was washed away in the rain," he says as he walks to his mattress with a limp. He claims that he used to visit his sons once in three months. People working with Banyan say Sathya is a person who could be on the brink of mental illness. "He lives on the streets and does not talk about how he ended up here," says a social worker from the Banyan, Archana Shekhar.

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The [Chennai Corporation](#) according to the Supreme Court's order has set up 15 shelters across the city, which is expected to provide shelter, bathroom facilities and two meals a day. But hardly five of them function on a daily basis. The other 10, like the ones on Chamiers Road, Mylapore, Chintadripet, remain locked. "Most people do not know about these," says Vanessa Peters of Citizen's Rights Forum. "People are scared to use them thinking they will lose their freedom of movement," says.

Human Rights organisations across the world including Amnesty International say mental illness and homelessness are causally linked. "Living alone on the streets for years makes one vulnerable and scared of life around," explains S H Mohamed Arshad, a volunteer working with the mentally ill for four years. "With no one to care about them, they slowly start losing hope of life, becoming depressed," he says. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that one out of every four people will suffer from some sort of mental disorder at some stage in their lives.

As the group enters the Lighthouse MRTS station, two old women emerge from the darkness, rushing to the group pressing a kiss to their hands. Parvathy and Poongavanam who look to be around 70-years-old, are too old to work and don't remember their families. "My brother is an alcoholic. My parents died many years ago. I used to be a domestic maid, but I got sick and stopped working," says Parvathy. On most days, the two destitute women used to go hungry.

For women like them who are old, destitute and had nothing to live for, even a single meal of food, puts a gleam of hope and gratitude in their eyes, says Archana.

Believing that showing a little kindness to the most marginalized people in society-homeless-access to basic facilities could save them from mental illness, the Banyan decided to launch the Kind People Happy City initiative. "One of the programs is street engagement. We try making the streets safe and showing atleast a few people we care for them by giving them one meal a day," says Arshad. "It is important that they are assured of it and begin trusting us to provide it," he says.

Banyan tries to convince the homeless to use the shelters, assuring them that they can come and go as they please. "Aiya, why don't you come to the shelter to just have a bath and shave? You can have lunch, wear new clothes we give you and return to the streets," explains Archana, as she distributes a food packet to a leper who also sleeps on the pavements of Santhome.

Other volunteers who have been visiting the man everyday for more than two weeks, enquire about his health and managing himself under the rain, slowly drawing out a promise from the gaunt looking man to visit the shelter. "It is important to access the same people everyday. Make them trust us, and give them a feeling of being cared about. That's all it takes," says Arshad.

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gopal (chennai)

12 Nov, 2012 05:11 PM

Soon chennai will become distitute and also india due to these ugly politicians. God alone can save us.

Suresh (CHOO LAI)

12 Nov, 2012 02:05 PM

Wonderful work by Banyan and it's volunteers. I would like to suggest it's volunteers that, to do service of any kind is not for the well-beingness of others, but it's for there own well-being and uplfitment of there own consciousness to higher understanding's.

