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(Note: The names used in the case story are Pseudo names for confidential purposes.)

STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

We know India is one of the most developed and busiest countries in the entire world. No one has time for anyone. A country which has billions of people living together; rush/ competition is evident. In this rush, people have forgotten who they are and what their roles and responsibilities are. Their only objective is to earn money to fulfill their needs and wants. They have forgotten their major responsibility i.e taking care of their near and dear ones. They have forgotten that without them one's life has no value.

Delhi; the capital city of India is one of the busiest cities of the country. Millions of people from all over the country as well as from other countries come here to look for better job opportunities. Being a new member of the city and working here, I feel I had an enriching experience, meeting with people and interacting with people who come in hope of better opportunities and better life and especially people whose life are on the streets. In the midst of the night when the entire city is sleeping, we find many people struggling to find shelter. As life is not a bed of roses where you get whatever you want; people of Ren Basera too were trying hard to earn money for better living but had no place to live. Ren Basera has been protecting families through providing shelter. Interacting with those people really made me know more about the real world where people are struggling every day to meet their basic needs.

The days spent knowing different kind of homelessness issues made me more aware about the struggles that each person goes through in his/her life. In the Ren Baseras I got to know about different age group people who had become homeless due to various issues. There were elderly people who were there due to rejections from their family members or had no families, young youths who were working but had no good income to stay in a proper way, families who were forced to stay in night shelter homes for years due to resettlement problems; women who had to

look for shelter due to different circumstances such as abuse, widow etc.; children who were away from home from their childhood Here I would like to bring out the story of an elderly woman for which I have done a case study and the obstacles she faces as a homeless of a dependent age group

In a recent data collected by Supreme Court Commissioner's Office, they found 46,724 people to be homeless in Delhi. What is homelessness? Why do we call Homelessness an issue? People who are unable to secure their life; maintain regular, safe, and adequate housing or lack "fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence"

Having keen interest in working in a night shelter, she came across an elderly woman who had been staying in Ren Basera at Reganpura, Karol Bagh Shelter home which was provided by Ashray Adhikar Abhiyan since the last five years.

William Shakespeare had said in one of his plays "As You Like it", "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts, His acts being seven ages. This quotation was what hit my mind while interacting with the elderly woman.

When a child is born he/she is taken care and brought up by the family members with utmost care and affection. Slowly when the child grows up they are made capable of facing the world so that they start adapting to the world and make a life of their own. The parents go through all sorts of difficulties so that their children can get the best from whatever they earn. But after being old when the parents need the same kind of love and affection from their children; they are neglected. The care and affection which the parents give to the children while growing up goes all in vain and act in such a selfish manner where they even tend to forget their parents. The children forget that they are in this world because of their parents. In the world today, there is rush for everything. People have time for no one. In this case when they need to look after their old parents, they tend to neglect them and avoid them so are sent to Ashrams or thrown out of their houses so that they can get rid of their responsibilities. The case of "Amma" whom I fondly named had a similar story to tell.

After going to the women shelter home, everyone seemed to me to be engaged in their own work, except three women sitting in one corner. Their sight never left the children who were

playing inside the room. I approached the trio of Ammas sitting there who were a little hesitant. The first conversation started with one of the Ammas who kept on complaining regarding the children who used to make noise in the shelter home but then was also enjoying with them. She was expressing all the things very easily and everyone could understand what she wanted to do. But the person that I noticed was the other Amma who was very quiet and did not speak too often. She seemed to have more than what she showed. A story very few knew. I wanted to be one of them.

The first things that struck my mind was that Amma had no reaction for any of the thing that were happening. I was uncertain if she would talk to me. It is definitely a challenge when you want to associate yourself with an introverted person. Somehow, I happened to start a conversation with her and found out that she was open and free, once people starts giving her the necessary space. Every individual is unique and complex, I understanding a person in one go is not an easy work. Similarly, Amma spoke to me very slowly on the very first day. It seemed as if she was thinking “They have come here today but from tomorrow they will not be coming.” The next day when I entered the center; the moment she saw me, she was very happy. A different charm could be seen in her face. I was dumbstruck when she called me “Didi”. I was like no Amma you are a grandmother to me, don’t call me “Didi”. With her consent, I began interacting during which I was able to understand how it feels to be homelessness. The way Amma interacted with me was more than enough to understand the suffering of what homelessness meant. More than that I could understand what was making her depressed.

Amma was born in 1936 in Bardhman, a city near Calcutta as “Monali Bamon”. Being born in a simple family where her father was a gardener, she was a very enthusiastic and bubbly child. During her time, child marriage was prevalent. In 1947, she too was married to a Bengali family at an early age. She quoted saying “I was married when the partition between India and Pakistan was taking place. I was eleven back then”

Fate had written a different story for her. She was happily married with two sons and two daughters. But after few years, she lost two of her sons at an early age due to ill health. Destiny played another tragedy when her husband died due to Jaundice leaving her with the entire responsibility of the house and two daughters.

Left with two children, she started her journey where she had to play the role of a mother as well as father to her two children. More than that she had to face the society where women had to work inside the four walls of the house.

In Calcutta, she struggled a lot to meet her basic needs. She worked as a domestic labor going from one house to another cleaning people's house to earn money. "This is how I educated my two children Prapti and Prathana" she says. After getting her daughters married off she started taking care of her own mother. But after her death she had none to take care of. So along with her friend she started her new journey to Malabar Hills, Maharashtra.

She shared her story saying, "After the death of my mother, along with my friend "Aparna" who was already staying in Maharashtra, she made me meet "Madamji" (whom she fondly spoke of during the entire conversation) who had been like a God to her." She was fortunate enough to find a good job in the beginning itself. She shares, "I was asked by Madamji, do you know how to cook, and will you work in my house?" She started her job as a cook at a businessman's house who had links with the Bollywood industry. She shares excitedly, "You know what I have met a lot of celebrities and they have appreciated my cooking as well. I used to work at Madamji's house from morning to evening cooking food for her family members according to their interest. They used to love my cooking. They used to have a lot of parties where I used to cook for many people. During the process I got a chance to work in few of the celebrity's house as well."

She expressed her heartfelt gratitude to her Madamji who treated her with so much love and affection. She said that she had her regular duty where she used to cook for twelve family members breakfast to dinner according to their likes and dislikes. She used to love her work as she was working as well as getting care and love like she always wanted

After working as a cook, she even got a chance to go to countries such as USA, UK and places in India like Kashmir, Mumbai as a nanny taking care of her Madamji's grandchildren. She says, "I was fortunate enough to find work and shelter in a very good house where people treated me very well."

It was a revelation moment, where she told me stories about her overseas' affairs and it was indeed difficult to believe. The first thing after I heard the story was "Is she suffering from schizophrenia?" None the less Keeping a non-Judgmental attitude I continued my interactions

Slowly after seeing some of the pictures and hearing her viewpoints I understood that whatever things shared by her was true.

Despite being so old, she was doing things on her own unlike others. When I tried helping her, she never allowed saying “I have to take care of myself, no one is going to do it for me forever.” Such honest gestures also somehow proved that she was telling the truth.

Slowly, the next conversation began ,” How did she become homeless?” She began, “A daughter can be yours forever but a son-in- law cannot be a son to you.” Indeed I was very curious to know the meaning behind it and further her life.

She then began by saying after working for more than twelve years; her body had started giving pains and started having problems like Blood Pressure, pains in various parts of the body. Soon she was not able to work much. Then one day, Madamji wanted to send her home so that she could rest properly and be free from all her burdens. She then went to one of her daughters house where she was kept properly till the time she had her money. After that she says,” There always used to be fighting going on in the house regarding me. Till when they would look after me. I had no money.” Then one day her son- in- law dropped her to a Sai Temple in Lajpatnagar in Delhi where she survived one year by begging for money.

When she shared the story, I personally felt goose bumps in my body and I could feel the pain in Ammas eyes while sharing her story. She feels grateful to Ren Basera who came to her rescue and gave her proper shelter. The people living in the world today have forgotten that the luxuries that they are enjoying today were due to their parents who had worked day and night for their proper upbringing. The world today has forgotten that one day all of us will be getting old and will be in the same state as they have kept their parents in. The elderly persons feel the need of physical, moral, financial and emotional support from their children but the children are involved in their own needs and necessities.

Imagine a life without your mother? When we are in our growing stage from our morning till evening our life starts and ends with her. She cooks food for us;, she fulfills every need and want.

A woman after marriage is always said to be known by her husband's name; after having a child she devotes all her life for her children. While having conversation with Amma, I kept on recalling all the things that my mom has done for me; I am here because of her. My world revolves around my family. How can I let go of them when they have been there throughout my thick and thin. I cannot. I guess I will never let that happen.

In Amma's case, she was a strong independent lady who gave up her entire life for the betterment of her children but in the end she was a burden to her own children. Amma had struggled her entire life for her two children; what did she get in return? Pain, injustice and what not in life. What was her fault? Why has the world become so cruel that they forgot from whom they had got this life?

Old age is definitely a period when elderly people need to be given proper care and attention. They do grumble a lot when it comes to their needs and wants not being fulfilled. When we look at them from their perspective, they are definitely right. Imagine when a person has done everything in their life on his/her own; suddenly they are not able to do anything. In this state the elderly women will definitely have a different perspective towards their life where they are hallucinated with the things they used to do and so compare things with what is going on in the present.

Amma had different vulnerable moments in her life. As a young teenager who should have the freedom to do whatever she wants, was taken away when she got married. Maybe in that period she had done what rest of the world used to do. But then as a child her responsibilities had grown a lot. After marriage she faced different kinds of problems like losing her two children. With time it healed but then their memories always remained. During the conversation, she kept on repeating she had four children out of which two died. As time passed in her life, she lost her husband after which she had to look after her children as a single mother; take care of the entire home as well as to earn money to take care of her child go from house to house looking for jobs. If she had a son then she would have been able to stay with him, but then getting both her daughters off she had no one to look after their marriages. She could not just go and stay with her daughter's family. Life was very uncertain for her till the time she came to Maharashtra. She was fortunate enough till the time she was working, but when she needed proper care and attention she got a chance to be with her near and dear ones, but only for a certain period of time. After

having no money she was left in the streets by her own family.. It was a nightmare for her when she was left on the streets.. She said that she used to beg for money for her survival. She was sent home thinking she could relax and get a better life but then she had to struggle for her basic needs. Her identity was that of a beggar and not as that women who used to be appreciated for her cooking skills and the hard work she had done in life. Everything was taken away from her just like that. She shows her hands saying, “This was the hand from which I used to cook food, now look at it what it has become.” Being old became a curse for her.

Despite getting shelter, she has her own problems which can be seen but she tries not to show it. Amma has not been able to work or fulfill her needs. Not being able to walk much and the pain she has in her body takes away all her desires. She is not even able to walk to take her own food. The pain she feels on her leg can be minimized by, putting anointment or oil; but her inner bruises cannot be minimized, they are still there, lurking inside her. She has been missing her most important support system i.e her family members. While talking to me she says even I have a granddaughter whose name is Nandita. She must be like you she says. When she was explaining things it could be seen she was longing to be with her family. She is definitely getting a better life than how it would have been if she was in the streets but then it is a human heart. If I have to point out what problems she was having now, it can be described as, a women who was always physically and mentally active had become handicapped where all her body was working but was tied up due to all the works she had done in her lifetime for her family members.

Amma’s case was a reflection for me to realize my parent’s importance in my life. Every day they are doing things for their children. In a recent conversation with my aunt she told me that my mom had visited a doctor since she was not well. I did not have any idea she was not feeling well. The thing was I was not well and during every conversation I kept on telling her what all problems I was having due to not being well. Sometimes you need someone to show you the mirror. I guess Amma made me realize it.

Being from a Social work Background, I was able to understand in depth the plight of the elderly people living in RenBaseras. From her, I was able to understand the important role a family plays in shaping our lives. At home, even I have grandparents but they are respected a lot by my mother and father whether it is my mother’s parents or my father’s parents. In future too I will give the same respect, care and love to her my and fight for them if any injustices are done.

Being a social work student I realized to change the world first you need to change yourself. Change begins only when you change yourself.

Putting all these observations, analysis, interactions into words has somehow changed and motivated me to do better in life. Sometimes you need to know what is more important in your life. When someone asks me why you are doing this and that or say GET a life; I always replied saying, I love this work. It's not work for me, being able to connect someone and being able to support someone in turn makes one satisfied. I definitely love all that I am doing. I chose this path. I used to reply to them saying now is the time for me to make a career or say these things are never going to come back. It's true that these things are never going to come in my life thinking I will not get a chance to learn thinking about I am done with my studies I will be focused into other things. I realized that in the middle of all these I am being selfish and only thinking from my perspective of life. I did learn to balance both my career and relations.

Visiting night shelter homes also made me know the problems one has being in the shelter home. We cannot expect a night shelter to be like your perfect home. Amma had definitely got a shelter there, but then for any women of her age where they need a peaceful environment, they were not getting it. It seemed as if they have forgotten who they were ; lost somewhere finding their own identity. The memories keep on haunting her. Over the time when a woman is kept in these shelters, even if others try to heal their pain they seem to be emotionally, psychologically down.

When I analyzed her feelings and her story, I could feel the pain was so deep that the smile on her face seemed to be longing for someone in others faces. When I was talking about the surrounding she was living in, she would say few names saying those were the names of her grandchildren. Even the physical pain that was growing in her body due to old age; she was expressing the pain but during one such conversation she said," These pain are not going to heal my internal pain."

These fourteen days have been a life lesson for me to know and value relations. Visiting the other shelter homes, I came across different kinds of homelessness; in all these difficulties one thing common that I found was that everyone out there were either struggling for the betterment of the family or they were suffering because of the family. I was able to understand how a person's life changes due to certain happenings.

This case study not only became a study which we were required to do. Keeping all these things into words had made me change for better. I think it really gave me an opportunity to know the essence of life.

The whole experience was so enriching and emotionally engaging which transports our heart and soul into another dimension of people's life and to experience their sorrow and pain. Ammas story will always occupy an important place in my heart forever and some days after my long worldly journey I would want to return to her to hear bed time stories just like we used to have as children by our grandmothers because I feel I'm still a child in my heart and I will always be a child for her.

After spending two weeks in shelter homes, experiencing and understanding the life of a homeless person I have come to this point where I would like to question myself and also to all of you to reflect upon and be accountable for our actions so I would like to conclude with the following end note and suggestions:

- Is too much to ask people to shed their inhibitions? Is it too much to ask people to deliver? We should not laugh at eye paining homeless vagabond without making an effort to listen to their stories. We should lend them the courtesy of listening and try our best to do at least something to help those less privileged than us. After all they too are human beings like ourselves and a little help from us will be an enormous help to them.
- Why is it that we can't at the least treat them with dignity; what is there to lose from our part;
- Who should come out to claim responsibility? Government, Civil society; NGOs; General Citizens or do we just get bogged down by doing blame game things?

“Our society must make it right and possible for old people not to fear the young or be deserted by them, for the test of a civilization is the way that it cares for its helpless members.”

- **Pearl S. Buck**