



Research Paper

Women Beggars in Patna: A Sociological Study of the Hanuman Mandir of Patna

Vishakha Natasha¹, Dr. Fazal Ahmad²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Patna University

²Professor, Department of Sociology, Patna University

ABSTRACT

The issue of begging within urban sacred complexes not only highlights economic struggle but also reveals persistent gender, caste, and spatial disparities prevalent in modern Indian society. In Patna, the Hanuman Mandir adjacent to Patna Junction is a central location where numerous women beggars gather each day, managing their existence amidst faith, exclusion, and informal job markets. This research investigates the lived realities, survival tactics, and socio-economic circumstances of women beggars operating within this sacred space, based on qualitative research and sociological study. Predominantly hailing from disadvantaged Dalit and other backward caste profiles, these women frequently experience compounded vulnerabilities linked to widowhood, disabilities, aging, and migration from rural areas of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh that are affected by droughts or floods. The sacred nature of the temple provides them with a degree of symbolic legitimacy and partial safety, while simultaneously emphasizing their marginal status as recipients of ritual donations and religious sympathy. By placing their daily experiences in the context of temple activities, pilgrimage movements, and charitable networks, this research underscores the gendered negotiation of sacred spaces by these economically reliant women. Utilizing Pierre Bourdieu's idea of symbolic capital along with Giddens' structuration theory, the study investigates how these women cultivate agency and resilience in spite of systemic neglect and socio-religious oppression. Additionally, the research considers public perceptions, the silence of temple authorities, and the government's lack of action regarding the rehabilitation of these overlooked urban impoverished individuals. This study contends that women beggars in sacred sites like Hanuman Mandir are not merely passive recipients of charity, but rather active contributors to the religious economy who warrant attention from scholars and policymakers alike.

Keywords: Women beggars, Urban poverty, Religious economy, Gender and caste, Symbolic capital, Patna city

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I. Introduction

Begging in urban India is a complex social issue that is deeply intertwined with historical, economic, and cultural factors, highlighting systemic inequalities and marginalization. Urban areas, especially those with religious significance and public gathering spots, often attract beggars due to the high volume of pedestrians, charitable traditions, and socio-religious elements. Sacred sites, like temples, become central locations where the act of donating alms is connected to religious merit, thus drawing individuals who depend on public kindness for survival. The Hanuman Mandir complex in Patna serves as an illustration of this phenomenon, acting as a densely populated area for begging where many women gather each day. These women, typically from marginalized communities, navigate a complex web of survival tactics, social connections, and vulnerabilities within this sacred environment. Their presence prompts important questions: What are the socio-economic backgrounds of these women? What strategies for survival and social networks do they utilize? In what ways does the sacred space impact their experiences and the way they are perceived by the public? The significance of this study lies in its ability to illuminate the intersection of gender, poverty, and religion in urban India. By concentrating on women beggars within a religious complex, the research intends to enhance sociological insights into how marginalized individuals manage their identities and livelihoods in spiritual settings. Additionally, it aims to inform policy measures that cater to the requirements of this vulnerable group. The

paper's structure consists of an introduction outlining the context and importance of the study, a literature review, a comprehensive methodology detailing the research design and ethical considerations, an analysis of the socio-economic backgrounds of the women beggars, an investigation of their daily routines and survival methods, an assessment of how the sacred space influences their experiences, a discussion that integrates theoretical perspectives, and a conclusion that offers recommendations for policy and future research.

II. Review of Literature

Begging in urban India is a complex social issue that is deeply embedded in historical, economic, and cultural contexts. It reflects systemic disparities and marginalization, particularly affecting vulnerable groups. **G.S. Ghurye**, a notable Indian sociologist, highlighted the structural dimensions of urban poverty, noting how systemic inequalities lead to the marginalization of specific groups, pushing them toward begging for their survival (**Ghurye, 1959**). He asserted that the caste system and social stratification are significant factors that perpetuate poverty and exclusion. **U.R. Desai** further classified beggars based on their physical capabilities and reasons for begging, distinguishing between able-bodied individuals who resort to begging due to the lack of job opportunities and those who are physically disabled, thereby providing a more detailed perspective on the beggar community (**Desai, 1994**). The intersection of gender and poverty creates distinct challenges for women beggars in urban India. Research by **Leena Abraham** highlights the vulnerabilities women face in public environments, emphasizing safety concerns, exploitation, and societal stigma (**Abraham, 2005**). She points out that women beggars often experience dual marginalization stemming from both their gender and socio-economic position. **Harsh Mander** highlights the systemic neglect and exclusion experienced by women beggars, noting their limited access to basic necessities and the various forms of abuse they encounter from authorities and the public (**Mander, 2012**). These findings emphasize the need for gender-sensitive strategies to address the situation of women beggars. Religion and sacred places significantly influence the legitimization and continuation of begging in India. **Émile Durkheim's** theory suggests that religion acts as a unifying force within society, creating distinctions between the sacred and the profane (**Durkheim, 1912**). Temples, as sacred venues, often become hubs for charitable actions, validating the act of giving alms. This religious support for charity not only sustains begging practices but also weaves them into the socio-religious fabric of society. Urban ethnographies offer important insights into the experiences of beggars in various Indian cities. **Asha Ram's** work, 'Begging in India,' provides a thorough examination of the socio-economic factors that drive individuals to beg (**Ram, 2010**). Research conducted in cities like Delhi, Varanasi, and Hyderabad uncovers migration trends, revealing that many beggars come from rural areas seeking better opportunities. These studies illustrate how urbanization, insufficient social security, and inadequate rehabilitation initiatives contribute to the ongoing cycle of begging. The interplay of structural poverty, gender vulnerabilities, religious validation, and urban dynamics creates a complicated framework that sustains begging in India. Comprehending this framework necessitates a multidisciplinary approach that takes into account the interactions among social, economic, cultural, and religious elements. Such an approach can guide the development of more effective policies and interventions aimed at tackling the fundamental causes of begging and fostering the rehabilitation and empowerment of beggars, especially women, in urban India.

III. Research Methodology

The current research based on qualitative study to explore the lived experiences, survival tactics, and social networks of female beggars within the sacred complex of Patna's Mahavir Mandir (Hanuman Mandir), situated close to the Patna Junction railway station. Ethnographic methodology effectively captures the intricate everyday realities and spatial practices of marginalized communities within specific cultural settings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The study's focus is limited to the Hanuman Mandir sacred complex, renowned for its substantial visitor traffic and high rates of almsgiving, which makes it an important religious-economic microcosm in urban Patna. The sample comprises 15 women beggars, chosen through purposive sampling based on their availability and willingness to participate, representing a range of ages, including elderly women, widows, and those with physical disabilities. This sampling approaches depth over breadth to achieve rich descriptions and contextual authenticity. Data collection methods consist of in-depth semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation of daily activities, ritual practices, and social interactions, augmented by informal discussions and field notes. With ethical consent and participant permission, a voice recorder was utilized to capture interviews, ensuring accuracy in data representation. The researcher engaged in reflexive practice throughout the fieldwork to reduce potential bias from positionality. Strict ethical guidelines were followed, which included obtaining informed consent, anonymizing identities, and being sensitive to the participants' personal trauma, religious beliefs, and social stigma. However, some limitations remained, such as restricted access to temple grounds during busy festival times and occasional lack of cooperation from local authorities or temple staff, which hindered data collection efforts. These obstacles underscore the inherent complexities of conducting research in sacred public spaces where surveillance, religious propriety, and

institutional authority intersect. Despite these difficulties, the methodology facilitated a profound, empathetic, and contextually sensitive examination of the socio-religious lives of women beggars within an urban setting.

Socio-Economic Profile of Women Beggars

Based on primary ethnographic information gathered through semi-structured interviews and participant observation at the Hanuman Mandir sacred complex in Patna, the socio-economic profile of the women beggars illustrates entrenched patterns of structural marginalization connected to caste, regional underdevelopment, and gendered poverty. A significant proportion of the participants were from Dalit and extremely backward castes such as Musahar, Chamar, Dom, and Paswan, while a lesser number represented backward caste groups like Mallah and Nonia, highlighting the overrepresentation of historically oppressed communities among temple beggars. Regionally, most came from rural districts in Bihar that are prone to floods and droughts, such as Darbhanga, Saharsa, Madhubani, and Purnia, with others migrating from eastern Uttar Pradesh, mainly from the Ballia and Ghazipur regions, which are similarly characterized by rural stagnation and agrarian crisis. Linguistically, these women primarily communicated in Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Magahi, with limited proficiency in Hindi, often necessitating that their interactions with outsiders and officials be facilitated through gestures or through more literate co-beggars. The main reasons for their migration to Patna included extreme poverty, widowhood, being abandoned by husbands or children, physical disabilities, or experiences of domestic violence, driving them to seek refuge in the religio-public space of Hanuman Mandir, where the practice of giving alms is frequently normalized. The age distribution of the sample showed a predominance of middle-aged (35–55 years) and elderly (above 60 years) women, with some as young as 18–22, particularly those who had been abandoned following early marriages or domestic disputes. The majority lived either alone or in fragile community clusters near the temple, having severed or lost familial connections. In terms of education, most women were illiterate or had attended primary school briefly, lacking marketable skills beyond occasional work in household chores, embroidery, or seasonal agricultural tasks in their native areas. These limitations significantly restricted their opportunities for employment in both the formal and informal sectors, leading them into a life reliant on alms. Health conditions among these women were concerning, characterized by untreated chronic illnesses such as arthritis, tuberculosis, skin diseases, and poor reproductive health, largely worsened by unsanitary living conditions, exposure to pollution, and inadequate access to public healthcare facilities. Very few had access to government programs like Ayushman Bharat or old age pensions due to the lack of valid identity documents or proof of residence. Despite the close proximity of hospitals and primary health centers, most avoided these facilities due to costs, fears of mistreatment, or a lack of guidance. This socio-economic marginalization, compounded by caste and gender, places these women at the intersection of multiple forms of exclusion, making their presence in a sacred space not just a survival strategy but also a form of spatial negotiation in the absence of institutional support. Their dependence on religious charity is not merely an act of passivity but also a physical response to systemic dispossession, with the temple serving both as a refuge and a site of contested visibility within the urban religious economy.

Daily Life and Survival Strategies

Based on the primary field observations gathered at the Hanuman Mandir sacred complex in Patna, the daily existence and survival methods of women beggars demonstrate a highly structured, adaptive, and religiously oriented way of life shaped by temple schedules, ritual activities, and the behavior of devotees. Most women beggars arrive as early as 5:00 AM to secure optimal positions near the temple gates, flower stalls, or 'prasad' counters, aiming to approach devotees before or after their darshan, as they know from experience that the early morning and evening artis attract the highest number of visitors and donations. They coordinate their presence with temple rituals, aligning their requests with chants, bhajans, and sacred sounds to invoke religious compassion. Many recite the Hanuman Chalisa or repeatedly say 'Jai Bajrang Bali' to create a symbolic link with the deity and encourage ritual giving. Their religious expressions are not just performances but rather an integrated strategy of sacred self-positioning, utilizing the moral responsibilities of darshan-seekers to elicit charity. Living arrangements vary; some women sleep on sidewalks beside the temple complex under plastic sheets, while others share rented metal shacks in nearby slums like Kankarbagh or Mithapur, collectively paying low rents. Access to food largely depends on prasad, leftovers, or small contributions from local shop owners, and during festivities such as Tuesdays, Saturdays, and Hanuman Jayanti, they receive abundant food packets and donations, often enough to sustain them for several days. The availability of sanitation is extremely limited, with most relying on nearby public restrooms, riverbanks, or open areas, while the lack of bathing facilities leads to chronic infections and poor hygiene. Most of their clothing is received as donations from devotees or scavenged from charity events and trash, with a few women managing shared collections of old sarees and blankets that they recycle together. Women deliberately position themselves near the elderly, children, or individuals with disabilities to garner greater emotional compassion from pilgrims. Some serve as informal caregivers or assistants to more vulnerable beggars, ensuring their own survival through reciprocal support. Others claim specific spots near ritual entry points and resist newcomers, leading to occasional conflicts or

informal hierarchies among them. Reliance on religious charity, particularly during festival times, is crucial for their livelihood, as both in-kind and cash donations significantly increase during holy occasions, religious fasting days, and temple-hosted events. Tuesdays and Saturdays, deemed sacred for Hanuman worship, are viewed as economic chances, prompting many women to adjust their weekly schedules accordingly, even temporarily traveling to other shrines like Gulzarbagh Hanuman Mandir or Bari Patan Devi for similar benefits. This pattern of sacred reliance highlights a complex interaction between religious timing, spatial positioning, and embodied poverty, where survival is secured through a religious act deeply rooted in both belief and strategic need. Despite their neglect within official welfare systems, these women exhibit remarkable resilience and socio-spatial acuity in navigating an urban religious environment that both marginalizes and supports them. Their lives, precarious yet sacred, reflect a profoundly gendered negotiation of faith, space, and public generosity.

Temple Space, Public Perception, and State Response

The Hanuman Mandir complex in Patna serves not only as a space for worship but also as a socio-economic environment that paradoxically upholds begging while simultaneously pushing its participants to the margins. Through ethnographic observation and interviews, it becomes clear that the temple setting creates a context where the act of giving alms (bhiksha) is not just accepted but actively encouraged, drawing from deeply embedded religious ideals of dana (charity) and punya (merit) that position beggars as channels of spiritual reward for those who donate. Women who beg, despite being socially overlooked in formal policy considerations, acquire a form of quasi-legitimacy through this religious and cultural endorsement, particularly on ritual-laden days such as Tuesdays and Saturdays when the temple is crowded and spiritual enthusiasm runs high. However, the temple authorities demonstrate an ambiguous position; while there is a tacit acceptance of the beggars' presence, this acceptance is neither officially recognized nor accompanied by any welfare support. During periods of high pilgrimage traffic or visits from dignitaries, there have been instances of unofficial evictions or forced removals, indicating a preference for visual order over ethical accountability. This situation illustrates what Veena Das (1995) refers to as the 'moral hierarchy' in sacred public areas where elements of impurity and disorder are temporarily eliminated to showcase a sanitized form of devotion. Conversations with temple personnel reveal that, although they acknowledge the presence of beggars, they regard them as an inescapable "part of the landscape" rather than subjects worthy of moral consideration or institutional duty. In contrast, pilgrims often perceive the act of giving alms as fulfilling a religious obligation, viewing it more as a quest for spiritual merit than as an engagement driven by compassion or reformative goals (Madan, 1991). Numerous donors mentioned that contributing to "Hanuman's poor" was part of honoring personal mannat (vows), highlighting how religious narratives shape moral actions. Simultaneously, some pilgrims expressed contempt for beggars, branding them as 'lazy,' 'professional,' or 'fake,' which reveals the conflict between devotional charity and the neoliberal ideals of individual merit and productivity. This ambivalence is reflected in governmental actions, or more accurately, inaction. The municipal corporation and local police were reported by the women to sometimes conduct 'clearing operations,' especially during festival times or development initiatives, yet there is no coherent rehabilitation plan available. Their presence becomes a 'problem' only when it disrupts urban cleanliness or religious tourism, mirroring what Nandini Sundar (2009) identifies as the state's selective interaction with marginalized groups. Although occasional NGO initiatives or district surveys are carried out, most women remain unregistered and, therefore, excluded from benefits such as old-age pensions, housing programs, or health services. This places them within what Nancy Fraser (2009) terms 'misrecognized subjects' of state aid—visible but overlooked. An examination through the framework of social exclusion indicates that the sacred complex, while providing some refuge and cultural significance, also perpetuates patterns of invisibility. These women are spatially incorporated yet socially marginalized, present at the core of a sacred domain yet absent from its ethical discussions. Their existence is caught between divine kindness and civic neglect, where neither the temple nor the government fully recognizes their humanity. Consequently, the sacred complex operates as both a refuge and a venue for silent structural violence, where exclusion is exercised not through outright removal but by means of selective visibility, moral perplexity, and bureaucratic oversight.

IV. Discussion and Sociological Analysis

The daily experiences and spatial locations of women beggars at Patna's Hanuman Mandir can be comprehended through a nuanced sociological examination that employs Bourdieu's notion of habitus and symbolic capital, alongside Giddens' structuration theory, while also placing these women within the intersecting frameworks of caste, gender, and poverty. As defined by Bourdieu (1986), habitus encompasses the ingrained dispositions, practices, and perceptions influenced by one's position in the social landscape. The everyday activities of the women beggars, their submissive postures, ritualistic chants, and even their timing for being present in the sacred space can be interpreted as reflections of a habitus attuned to religious practices, representing a culturally inherited response to the sacred economy that values visible suffering. Their closeness

to the temple and the display of religiosity through chants of 'Jai Hanuman' or imitating ritual actions serve as symbolic capital, granting them fleeting acknowledgment within a moral economy that treats piety and charity as sacred duties. Through this symbolic engagement, they manage to transform religious sentiment into tangible rewards such as alms, prasada, or clothing, illustrating how marginalized individuals strategically exploit cultural resources within structural limitations (Bourdieu, 1986). However, their behaviors are not solely reactive; they embody a level of agency that corresponds to Giddens' structuration theory, which asserts that individuals are both influenced by and are influencers of the structures surrounding them (Giddens, 1984). The women beggars face constraints from caste systems, economic exclusion, and gendered vulnerabilities, yet they concurrently navigate these structures by creating micro-strategies for occupying space, establishing support networks, and synchronizing their presence with the patterns of religious life and community generosity. Consequently, the sacred area morphs into a space where agency and constraint coexist, fostering a form of embedded resistance. Moreover, the intersectionality of caste, gender, and poverty is prominently illustrated in how these women inhabit temple spaces, as they predominantly belong to Dalit or very backward castes, often being females who are elderly or disabled, and frequently migrants, which exacerbates their marginalization in both civic and religious contexts. Their presence reveals the contradiction between religious compassion and institutional disregard; while pilgrims engage in charitable acts rooted in spiritual duty, state and temple authorities neglect to address their conditions beyond superficial measures of removal or tolerance. This duality reflects what Nancy Fraser (2009) refers to as 'misrecognition', wherein symbolic inclusion in a religious economy does not translate into socio-political rights or social welfare benefits. Ultimately, the sacred complex emerges as a transitional space, where these women are permitted to exist, but not to fully belong; they are tolerated rather than protected, visible during charitable acts yet invisible in discussions surrounding policy. This sociological examination, therefore, underscores the profound contradictions present within urban religious environments, where the sacred and the profane, the ethical and the indifferent, coalesce in a complex and inequitable relationship.

V. Conclusion

This investigation into the women beggars within the sacred grounds of Patna's Hanuman Mandir uncovers a complex and deeply rooted structure of marginalization perpetuated by the interrelationship of religion, gender, caste, and poverty. The primary findings suggest that these women predominantly come from Dalit and extremely backward caste backgrounds, with many being elderly, widowed, disabled, or abandoned. Their relocation to Patna and the subsequent use of temple spaces as a means of survival arise from the breakdown of familial and rural support networks, economic hardship, and gender-based exclusion. By positioning themselves near pilgrims, engaging in religious rituals, and synchronizing with sacred time, they convert the temple environment into a place of livelihood, dignity, and visibility, even while remaining overlooked by state and temple authorities. From a sociological viewpoint, this research provides insights into the intertwining of religious charity and social-economic hierarchies. While the Hanuman Mandir space facilitates survival through ritualized charity, it does not convert symbolic inclusion into substantial improvement or institutional acknowledgment. This paradox—the simultaneous existence of religious compassion and systematic neglect—highlights how public sacred spaces operate as both refuges and areas of social abandonment. Women beggars in this context exert agency within structural constraints; however, their agency is limited by deeply rooted inequalities related to caste and gender. Based on these results, several policy recommendations are proposed. Firstly, there is a pressing need for gender-sensitive urban welfare initiatives aimed specifically at homeless and destitute women, with customized provisions for health care, nutrition, identity documentation, and education. Secondly, both temporary and permanent shelter facilities should be established near sacred complexes to ensure safety, sanitation, and dignity. Thirdly, collaborative rehabilitation programs that involve temple trusts, local NGOs, and municipal authorities can create community-based support systems that advance beyond mere charity towards long-term inclusion. The active participation of temple administrations is vital due to their moral authority and public sway. Future research might expand on this study through comparative analyses of sacred sites in various Indian cities to uncover commonalities and regional differences in begging. Long-term studies could also track the journeys of individual women beggars over time, illuminating shifts in their circumstances, strategies, and aspirations. Such research would deepen the sociological understanding of urban sacred spaces and their influence on the lives of those at the city's and society's periphery.

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