

Rural Homeless

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This 15 August, entire country will be celebrating the colours of freedom. With Indian Flags flying high in the sky, we will pay tribute to our freedom fighters. The progress we have made so far as a nation will be highlighted in Prime Minister's speech at the Red Fort. Development will again top the agenda. Interesting would be to see how age-old problems will find space in the new agendas.

Recently, the partial data was issued by Social, Economic and cast Census (SECC) that has once again proved that the tall claims of 'Shining India' are still far from reality. The recent report "The State of Food Insecurity in the World, 2015" released by Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations also reveals that the highest number of famished people in the world are in India. According to this report, one hundred ninety four million Indians fall victim to hunger. India is ranked 55 on the Global Hunger Index.

According to data released by SECC, twenty three million and seven hundred thousand of the total one hundred seventy nine million and one hundred thousand rural households have raw ceilings and walls with space of one or less than one room. Fifty three million and seven hundred thousand houses belong to the landless labourers. Only a quarter of the houses have members who earn more than five thousand rupees a month.

According to 2011 census sixty six million families were living in *kutcha* houses made of mud of one room and seven million four hundred thousand were homeless. The statistics revealed by SECC, however, do not match the 2011 census. Besides this fact, SECC is undoubtedly one of the most objective surveys done among the poor families in which details of homeless families have also been documented.

This survey will prove to be beneficial for the government to be able to implement the social welfare schemes on ground by identifying the beneficiaries. This calls for speeding up the process of verification of collected data. The current data available is enough to prove that benefits of so-called development are not reaching the actual beneficiaries residing in the remote and rural areas of this country. Almost half of rural families are victims of depression on one or more indicators. Number of citizens paying taxes is very few.

The SECC survey has not only counted the number of homeless families but has also documented their place of residence and source of earning. It is expected that not only the

central government but respective state governments will take necessary steps to link this data with all the social welfare schemes. Better will be if they provide benefits of such schemes to every family except the ones which fall in the automatically excluded category.

This seems to be imperative also because of the fact that families compulsorily reported under the survey which also includes the homeless families, is said to be less than one per cent of the total rural households. This seems to be in stark contrast with the ground reality.

Under the Indira Awas Yojana itself, target of providing houses to twenty million people has been set. The definition of homeless under Indira Awaas Yojana, however, is quite broad. Even then there is huge difference between the houseless families enlisted under SECC as compared to the number of houses required to be built under Indira Awaas Yojana.

Even after the independence, the need of providing housing to the rural poor was long ignored by the Indian Government. It was during the eighties that rural housing was included under the National Rural Employment Programme (NREP) and Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP). It was under the RLEGP that provision to provide money to schedule castes, schedule tribes and freed bonded labourers to build their houses was announced. Today, this scheme is known as Indira Awas Yojana.

In 1993-94, this scheme was aimed at providing benefits to all the people falling below the poverty line. However, for a long period of time the homeless people were unable to benefit from the scheme as they did not own the land on which money was being given to build the house. For several years the status quo remained unchanged. It was in 2009 that the central government included the provision of providing land to the landless below poverty line (BPL) families. The scheme continues to benefit the poor till date.

Bihar was one of the few states that had launched "The Bihar Privileged Person Homestead Tenancy Act, 1947" (BPPHTA) soon after the Independence. The purpose of this law was to provide legal ownership of the land to the people settled on *Rayyati* land; a land owned by landlords but given to his/her agricultural labourer family for settlement. Another important development in Bihar transpired in 2007 when Mahadalit Commission was constituted by the state government to identify the homeless, landless mahadalits and provide them land to construct their houses.

The Bihar government bought the land and decided to distribute three decimal to each family. According to this Mahadalit survey of Bihar, 881,133 mahadalit families were identified that owned land but were deprived of houses. 178,896 mahadalit families were both landless and homeless.

Be it the figures revealed by the 2011 Census or SECC, we take the data of the Rural Ministry or the survey report of Bihar's Mahadalits or statistics shared by National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), each point towards one fact that the number of people who are landless, homeless and landless and homeless both is maximum in our country.

To ensure rural housing, one of the most important aspects is to ensure land ownership rights. Unfortunately, there is no government or non-government data available regarding the legal ownership of residential land. The NSSO figures did collect the data considering the land of residence but it too has failed to provide any information related to ownership of land.

SECC too has focused on aspects like the type of houses, number of rooms, owned or rented but has skipped to take account of information like legal ownership of the land. Taking into consideration data provided by SECC survey but not limiting to it, time has come to rethink our Rural Housing Policy by understanding and analysing various aspects of homeless and landless people. The central government currently in power has made clear its vision of providing housing to every Indian citizen by 2020 however nothing related to it has started on the ground. It is the right time to consider the legal ownership of the houses and the land on which houses will be built. It is imperative that government should again conduct the survey of the rural homeless people as it is possible that despite having a house they may well have become homeless again due to social, economic, personal or other reasons.