

‘He doesn’t own a house but do you own a heart?’

By Nimra Shakil
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On the green belts of Chauburji, roundabout of MM Alam, under the shades on Mall road, on the grounds at Minar e Pakistan, near the Data Darbar, alongside the roads of Ichra, on footpaths, under the bridges and almost on every vacated space available in the city, homeless individuals are not unfamiliar to the residents of Lahore. With their ragged clothes, a bag consisting of their meager belongings, haunted eyes and somber face, they are the walking examples of impoverishment. Not to anyone’s surprise, there are no official statistics available for homeless individuals in Pakistan but press reports referring to the UN office for Coordination of Human Affairs indicated in 2011 that 500,000 people are homeless in Lahore and 5000 persons under the age 18 live on streets but the number must have been drastically increased by now.

‘Get up and leave! He is a drug addict,’ is the first expression you come across when you try to talk to a homeless individual. Commonly referred to as smokers, drug addicts, drunkards, crazy and even criminals. The fact most people fail to realize is most of them have either come to the provincial capital under the ‘illusion’ of getting an employment in a big city but ended up having no labor. Some lost their homes due to the criminal acts of pressure groups or they had disputes with their family and thus ended up being homeless.

Mustafa, 45, belongs to the first category. In the scorching heat of June, he was seen sitting in the green belt of Chauburji lost in his own thoughts. ‘Friends decided to go to Lahore from Bahawalpur in search of employment,’ he said about the reason behind his homelessness. ‘Sometimes, when I get employment, I work, otherwise there is nothing to eat. I was better off in my paternal city.’ When asked why he wanted to return back, he replied somberly, ‘There is nothing special about Lahore except for Data Darbar. My heart does not belong here.’

There is no permanent source of employment for these laborers who come to a bigger city with the hope of a better income. They don’t even earn enough to afford a shared rental space and are forced to live on the roads. With an added insult to injury, they are seen as addicts or criminals and struggle to save what little honor they are left with. For some, the situation is even worse. With just a road separating them, Heera Khan is seen eating parched bread with water in a crippled plastic bottle. He had a grimy bag filled with the little belongings he owned and with his 55 year old cumbersome body bearing bullet wounds, his story can be described as heart

wrenching.

‘I have names of the people of the pressure group who forcefully captured my beloved home,’ his eyes were blazing fire, ‘they sent me to jail for six months so I couldn’t protest. Who should I go to? The law enforcement agencies are practically slaves in their hands’. His home at Rehmat Colony, Batala Road was destroyed and demolished and he was devastated. ‘I just had an elder brother in the family who passed away due to a heart attack when he saw me arrested. Now I am alone and on my own.’ When asked if he has strived to get an employment he expressed number seven with the fingers of his hands. ‘This is the number of skills I acquired including welding, making chains and preparing sweets. My parents wanted to teach me everything and probably that’s why they named me Heera (diamond)’ a ghost of a smile appeared on his face which was a remnant of good times. ‘But now everyone prefers young employees so I stand with no chance.’

Heera Khan, like all others, expressed his concern over the disgrace he has to endure every day because of society viewing all of them as either criminals or drug addicts. All of them appealed to the government to give them more opportunities for employment but the authorities continue to turn a blind eye towards the rising number of homeless individuals in the city. Media has failed to give them due coverage and as a result their voices have failed to reach the concerned officials or the society. ‘People from the media did reach me last month,’ Heera Khan quoted a mainstream private media channel, ‘they assured me that my file will go to Islamabad but nothing has happened till date’.

The alarming rise in the number of homeless people, absence of justice, scarcity of employment and rising poverty has turned this situation into a disastrous state of affairs. It is a surprise that no government has ever expressed any concern over this situation. No NGO or any organization rendered to social service has turned up to help them. We as a nation should also think why there is no helping hand given to these people by any of us.

Heera Khan, his eyes lit with the delusion known as hope in this country and voice strained with shattered dreams, asked for a promise if the place he had been calling home from more than half a century will be returned to him. No one had the heart to answer the homeless being. Do you?