

AUGUST 2021 | ISSUE NO.V

# KOSHISH

A FIELD ACTION PROJECT OF THE TATA INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, MUMBAI

Introducing democratic community library in Chitkohara, Patna, Bihar.

*Get Inspired:  
Shri Miloon  
Kothari, Former UN  
Special Rapporteur on  
Adequate Housing talks  
on homelessness and  
housing as part of  
human rights.*

"Giving with  
Dignity":  
COVID-19 relief  
intervention

Priyanka Aidsani our intern shares her memories with Koshish.

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# FOREWORD

*Dear Friends of Koshish,*

*Due to unavoidable issues, we had to discontinue with our e-magazine but now we are excited to be back with this fresh issue of Koshish. To make up for the gap in between, we assure you to make this magazine more interactive, interesting with newer design and more opportunities for interns and volunteers to present their work. We are confident of receiving same love from all of you that we always showered upon us.*

*Entire world is struggling with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and situation has been extremely difficult for the homeless and migrant communities. We all witnessed how unorganized and informal labour were abandoned by the cities they help built and walked several hundred kilometers to reach their places. Several died on the way. What makes it worse is the silent nature of these deaths; we would never ever know the real loss. The way homeless citizens die silently in the cold winter nights or amidst the unbearable heat waves, this time too was no different. For those who survived then, the feeling of being a burden is going to haunt them for years to come; the pain of nobody caring is going to hurt for far longer than the physical impact. With the help of our institutional funding partner and individual friends trusting Koshish, we were able to make our small efforts in bringing some relief to the communities we work with.*

*Nothing can be more satisfying than witnessing the community members taking the leadership. Amidst the pain and chaos of pandemic, we experienced the pride and satisfaction of seeing our Mansarover Park community in Delhi coming together and give away the ration they received in relief, to the migrant workers walking back to their native places. Surpassing the uncertainty about their own survival, these people demonstrated what having empathy means in the actual sense.*

*The pandemic also exposed the fragile nature of our giving. The highly marginalized like the destitute or the ones living on streets with mental illness got excluded from most relief interventions by design itself as most of these relief programs required the person to 'seek' help. Dignity became the first and most crucial casualty of this approach. Koshish ran a campaign on the need to ensure dignity in charity if one wanted to do meaningful relief and not just meet the numbers. This edition carries a small note on our Relief intervention.*

*Continuing with our earlier practice of carrying an interview from a figure of inspiration, in this edition we have covered interview with Shri Miloon Kothari, a renowned intellectual and human rights defender. A huge supporter of grass root organisations and especially the youth, he provides brilliant insights into the issue of homelessness and its situation globally, the need for policy framework to deal with it adequately, and shares his experiences from working with international policy and advocacy groups.*

*We also bring a real-life story of a client who was reintegrated with the family. The people we meet in the institutions are with broken hearts and hurt souls. Koshish is an effort to help such people rebuild their lives; to whatever extent possible. Our primary goal is to help them gather themselves and make a fresh start in lives. In every edition we bring to you one such sharing.*

*As an organisation, we continue to invest in ourselves to develop us into a strong team. It is this team building process that has resulted in Koshish growing from a small pilot that ran largely on the strength of its young volunteers and interns to an organisation making significant impact and policy contributions in the field of homelessness and destitution. This edition covers an update on one such process as part of our team building process.*

*This edition carries all other regular features like an article from a former intern/ volunteer, decoding one program/ intervention explaining the rationale behind it, a photo story showcasing major field developments and so on. In this edition we share how starting a library in the homeless community was more of a strategy than an activity.*

*Koshish wishes to share that the community-based intervention we developed through years of experiences on the street has now been grown into a government program. The Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, GoI has initiated a pilot program for rehabilitation of persons engaged in beggary and covers 10 cities from across the country. We have been involved in the implementation as technical partner by the Ministry.*

*In yet another very crucial development, yours truly has been included as member in Task force on Social Protection, formed by State Planning Commission, Chhattisgarh. This shall hopefully allow us an opportunity to engage with crucial processes and systems related to social protection framework.*

*This year also saw us being included in the Consultative Committee constituted and chaired by Honorable Minister, Women & Child Development Department, Government of Maharashtra. We are committed to raise crucial issues regarding custodial situation and rehabilitation needs to the Ministry through this consultative committee.*

*Before I end my note, I was to make an appeal to all friends and well-wishers reading this e- magazine. This is probably the toughest period of time that we would get to see in our lifetimes. People who did well to look after themselves are now struggling for bare minimum. This is the time to show solidarity with people who have nothing. True, it won't be an easy task given the hardships that we are facing ourselves but still if we try, we will be able to support at least some people. It is difficult time, no doubt, now can we do our best efforts to ensure that this phase is remembered as a period when people got together to face a mammoth pandemic and not as a period of helplessness.*

*Take good care of yourself and those around you. Stay safe!*

*In prayers,*

*tarique*



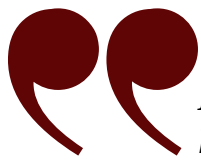
## GET INSPIRED



# Shri Miloon Kothari

*In this edition, Mohd Tarique, Founder of Koshish, interacts with Shri Miloon Kothari, Former Special Rapporteur at UN on Adequate Housing and senior scholar/activist involved with the range of human rights issues. He is somebody who many look up for his sharp understanding of the legislative and policy processes.*

*In this interview, he shares his experience of the global housing and land rights crisis, including homelessness, historical perspective of the issue, approaches he feels would work, role youth can play and more.*



*If you want to commit, no matter what profession you choose, to becoming a human rights worker develop a combined humanitarian and human rights capacity.*



**Mohd Tarique (M.T.): You were there at United Nations looking at housing concerns globally. How was your experience?**

Miloon Kothari (M.K.): It was a very enriching experience. It was work that required developing a global perspective. I was able to look at housing crisis in many parts of the world. I went to 13 countries on missions for the UN, visiting remote areas, taking testimonies from people and communities at the grassroots level. It became apparent that housing is a global crisis. It is also prevalent in the so-called developed countries of the West. The scale of the housing crisis across the world is serious and not to be underestimated. Amongst the many issues that make up the global crisis is that of people becoming homeless and forced to live in inadequate housing and living conditions; the

commodification of housing, including through rampant speculation of land and rapid gentrification of neighbourhoods and, of course, the affordability problem that even impacts lower and middle-class people everywhere. In none of the countries I visited did I find either an accurate assessment of the scale of the problem (the number of people homeless, for example) nor effective measures being taken to tackle speculation of housing, land and property. Since the mandate with the UN was a human right mandate, I was able to use existing international law and develop new standards that allowed for sharp analysis and radical prescription for governments worldwide based on people's human rights. I was also fortunate that before I was appointed to the post, the right to adequate housing had already

been developing as a distinct human right being used by civil society movements in different countries, including India (The National Campaign for Human Rights (NCHR)); UN bodies (The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) and in numerous national constitutions. Today, many more laws and policies on housing have come into existence. There are, in many countries, court judgements that are based on human rights principles and standards, including on the right to adequate housing and significant developments were taking place at the policy level. Ironically and tragically, in many countries, however, the situation on ground had worsened. Through my experience of 8 years as UN Special Rapporteur, one of the key learnings, based on all the knowledge and insights gained from the interactions on the ground was that there were clear evidences of a growing gap

between recognition of housing rights and the reality on the ground; such that international bodies, including the UN and other multilateral and bilateral institutions and government were failing to translate the global standards, that they had declared their commitments to, into results – into practical outcomes. Civil society organizations across the world have been making valiant attempts to fill that gap. They have been pressurizing the governments. This is an effective area of action that we need to focus on. Unlike in the past, we have framework now, international human rights law is on our side. Of course, enormous challenges still remain. One major constraint or inability of all of us that I have observed and experienced, perhaps, is that we not been able to effectively challenge the neo-liberal economic policies, the power of the market. Question in front of us is how do you confront this hydra headed entity, especially when it directly benefits politicians and local and national government – the very people and institutions that we need to be on our side. Ultimately if violations of the right to adequate housing, just to take one human right, such as forced evictions and land grabbing are to stop, governments need to be made accountable and those violating these rights need to face punitive action.

**M.T: When compared, how do you find situation of homelessness different in India, if it is, especially in the context of government's response? How would you analyze government's response globally? What are the wider impacts?**

M.K: Increasingly, around the world, there is an unhelpful distinction between work and humanitarian work. Many, who

take decisions that govern our lives, take a 'basic needs';charity and band-aid approach that says fine let's take care of those who are suffering by providing charity, social safety nets. There is little thinking of basis structural issues that go beyond the provision of relief to asking, what is obvious in human rights work, structural questions– such as why do we

*"Human rights perspective is very powerful. One of the abiding precepts of human rights work, possibly inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's Talisman, is that the formation of all laws, polices, administrative actions, budgets, must be premised on meeting the needs of the most marginalised FIRST"*

have some many people homeless in the first place? Why is homelessness growing across the country? This is the reason I had called in my reports to the UN for a combination of human rights and humanitarian approach – not just to provide relief where necessary but to respond to the reasons for the suffering we witness every day. Such an approach would apply to situations brought about by disasters as well as the phenomenon of homelessness. Let's be clear. Structural issue can be addressed only from a human rights framework, both in the analysis of the situation (why did we get where we are) but also the solutions – that must be based on the participation of the homeless, on creating opportunities such that the homeless can gain and sustain their own human rights. Examples across the world that are adopting this approach must be learnt from. We need to, of course, come up with our own home-grown solutions but these have to be based on globally accepted principles and standards such as the international human rights instruments. In reality, what happens is reverse of this.

That's the change that has to happen. The main purpose of existence of governments or any sector has to be to ensure the rights of the poor and once those are satisfied then move to other parts of society. However, in my experience not a single country in the world regularly meets this requirement. On my country missions, I always asked the Ministers I met about

their policies to improve the housing situation of bottom 20% and no one had satisfactory answers- one Minister even told me 'that's an interesting concept'! Often the answer was 'oh yes we have policies of 'affordable housing' knowing full well that such housing, by and large, never reached the poorest and most deserving. I realized that it was in the so-called democratic countries, in fact, that the most egregious violations of the right to adequate housing take place. Take the issue of forced evictions of people and communities across the world. More and more people are being displaced from their homes and lands due to 'development' projects – large dams, mining, city beautification and so forth. India has one of the worst records in this case with a million persons internally displaced every year since independence. Faced with such large-scale crisis globally, we decided to develop operational standards for the UN. The result of three years of work was the creation, in 2008, of Basic Principles and Guidelines on Development based Displacement and Evictions.





These guidelines safeguard people's rights against displacement but ensure, in case of displacement, adequate resettlement and compensation. These have now become the operational global standards one violations, have been translated into 25 languages, are being cited in Courts and used as a basis for housing and resettlement policies. So, international standards became stronger yet the implementation remains patchy. What we have witnessed across the world is an obsession with creating world class cities. Hosting mega events has been taken to altogether different scale. We are using energy intensive methods to deliver services like water and products that require minerals so we have more dams being built and more mining taking place. To make matters worse, we have never planned out towns and cities to accommodate those displaced such that their human right is respected. It is a tragic irony, taking India as an example, that when a person, family or community is displaced they have nowhere to go, no office they can approach. We have the Constitutional freedom to move and resettle but no right to demand our rights when we reach our place of migration. It is an irony of democracy that people displaced from 'development' projects have

far lesser rights than refugees. This is a phenomenon that demonstrates the failure of democracy. Is it the fault of people that they are homeless? When people move to the cities they are often displaced again and forced to live 'illegally'. Unlike situation where you commit murder, robbery, if you are responsible for violating economic, social, political rights (all clearly recognized human rights violations), no officer is being held accountable for the crime of, for example, forced eviction. This is the pattern throughout the world. This is why the phenomenon is repeated ad nauseum – those responsible know they will get away with it.

**M.T: In spite of Supreme Court orders to set up shelters, most states haven't done it. Is it NGO's failing to build adequate follow up, lack of political will or unfeasibility of the plan? Do we have such references globally?**

MK: There is, of course, a need for more civil society organizations coming together and building pressure. Delhi's experience has shown that sustained work gives results. But other sectors have to engage, including Courts and local governments. Again, the Delhi example is illustrative of what can be achieved. It is the combination of NGOs' failing to build enough pressure as well as the absence of political will amongst governments. to do it. They cannot hide behind the lame excuse of not having enough resources. It's absolute callousness and complete disdain for the poor. It is state's attitude, of leaving everything to be done by NGO's, saying if it has to be done NGO's do it. it's a very short-sighted approach lacking the basic recognition that the poor have human rights. By not addressing the problems

This of thousand and lakhs of people living in extreme conditions, consequence is that we are creating apartheid cities that are going to lead to conflict. People won't take it for long. We have clear examples of countries like Brazil and South Africa. People see the wealth that is there. It is going to happen here, very soon. States are showing no vision, when they don't think of the future. It is only during election times when you go to low-income people with false promises.

**M.T.: Homelessness and destitution or beggary are also connected at many points. While lot is being attempted for shelters, nothing significant is spoken about criminalization of this homelessness that happens in the form of Beggary Prevention Legislations. Should advocacy for repeal of the Beggary Laws not be a natural next step for shelter activists? How do you see it?**

M.K: This certainly is an area that needs serious intervention. Unfortunately, this haven't been realized by most civil action groups. It should indeed be the natural progression of advocacy for Shelters. No civilized society can afford to have a legislation of this nature. It is not only against all principles of natural justice, but also unconstitutional on several grounds.

*I believe Koshish has been playing a significant role in this space. Impact that Koshish has created is significant, especially in bringing the issue at the centre stage of debate and discussions both within civil society as well as governments. This effort that Koshish has been making must be supported by wider groups, actively engaging with the issues of Human Rights.*





**M.T: People's movement or systemic engagement: your pick?**

M.K. I would say both. Movements have their impact but it is important to engage with the government systems. Ultimately it is the government that plans and regulates. IF systems are made more inclusive and responsive to people's real needs, movements will only be required to monitor state compliance not to create pressure. However, in the situation when systems have failed its people, citizen led movements acquire immense significance. Let us never underestimate the power of non-violent public protest.

**M.T.: What role you feel 'youth based' groups like Koshish play in this space? Someone who has spent years mentoring youth and teams, how would you see Koshish's growth as?**

M.K. I think the methodology of work, the 'constructive' approach adopted by Koshish for the work on beggars is a model for NGO's across the country. It is important to find spaces in the official bureaucracy that responds to the needs of the poor. It is equally important to demonstrate to governments that

the human rights approach works. This is where Koshish's work assumes great significance –including by dispelling the cynicism and hostility that some NGO's have developed against the state.

**M.T.: We are read by large numbers of students. Your message for them?**

M.K. My main message would be to please immerse yourself in learning about human rights, from the time of our freedom struggle and the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi, Ambedkar and others to the work of the UN over the past 75 years. Analyse the government response to the Covid crisis from a human rights lens and write and discuss whether Gandhiji's Talisman was respected. If you want to commit, no matter what profession you choose, to becoming a human rights worker develop a combined humanitarian and human rights capacity. I cannot end better than to quote Mahatma Gandhi "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others".

All the very best.



# ON A HOPEFUL PAGE!



**I**n April 2018, Koshish initiated a community library in Chitkohara, Patna, Bihar backed by the passion and enthusiasm of our children in the community. Housed in small dwelling of one of the community volunteers, the library is a special space for these children to come together to read, write and explore new ideas. The library has a wide collection of books that motivates them to constantly learn. Library also doubles up as a 'learning centre' for children who do not attend school for any reason; they come to the library to learn from other children who are happy to play 'teachers' to these children. Established, maintained and developed by the children themselves, the library has around twenty-five members from the age group of five to eighteen.

*The Community Library for the children in Chitkohara, Patna, Bihar has given the children an opportunity to not just understand democracy and leadership conceptually but also practice them in their own space. The small narration is a reflection of the valuable lessons we can learn from our children.*



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To understand the significance of seemingly usual intervention like a library, it is crucial to understand the history of this settlement. This cluster has mixed groups belonging to the Nat, Gulgulia, Dom, Dusadh and Mushan communities. These communities historically, have been the excluded groups engaged in vocations like hunting, forest gatherers, art performers, nomads and would earn their livelihood through these professions. However, with time, most of these activities either became unsustainable in the modern world or became illegal attracting punishment under the law. While their tradition occupations were banned and prohibited, very little was done by the state to provide them an alternative. Having lost the livelihood that they grew up learning, most of them gradually resorted to begging or rag picking. Some would find work as daily wage workers but this is not regular. Children in these families have seen poverty and exclusion from very close quarters and thoughts of education were a distant dream. However, this changed few years ago when Koshish started its intervention with this settlement. It took the program 3 years to get all children enrolled in the school. Unfortunately, few children did dropout later but majority of them are studying and parents have committed themselves to not engage their children in the act of beggary or rag picking. Most of these children are first generation kids attending schools or any formal education.

Thus, the Library holds great significance as it instils hope and courage in the children and their parents to want better from Life!

The story behind how this library came into being is also one of its kind. For the past few years, we have been working with the children in Chitkohara by enrolling them in schools and by taking regular classes with them. These classes focused on their curriculum as well as other activities like drawing, painting, craft, reading and writing. As part of an exercise in class, children were given few books to read; to our surprise children exchanged the books among themselves and each child got to read every book. The story behind how this library came into being is also one of its kind. For the past few years, we have been working with the children in Chitkohara by enrolling them in schools and by taking regular classes with them. These classes focused on their

on their curriculum as well as other activities like drawing, painting, craft, reading and writing. As part of an exercise in class, children were given few books to read; to our surprise children exchanged the books among themselves and each child got to read every book. Within days children finished reading all the books and asked for new set of books. This was very exciting for the team. Hundred more books based on sci-fiction, environmental studies and arts were ordered as the children were eager to learn more. Sensing an opportunity in this new-found interest of the children in learning outside classroom, we decided to go along them. This is when the library came into being. A room where children would usually gather to study was assigned as the library since it would be a safe space to keep all the books. The children decorated the library and were extremely excited to read in a separate space made specially for them.

One of the most unique features of this library is that it is run democratically by children. Inspired by the atmosphere of the general elections of 2019, children wanted to understand more about our political arrangement and therefore they were oriented on the forms of government and how electoral system functions. Excited, children decided to practise the democratic form of government within their set-up and proposed that they elect their leader in the library. Thus, we agreed to hold elections for them to elect the minister for library and children nominated themselves. It became like a festival. It was interesting to watch children campaign for themselves; they would address the group with their plans for the library, what all facilities they would introduce if elected and so on. They would design posters, explain their manifesto etc in an attempt to convince their voters so that they could be appointed as the minister. This turned out to be truly an unique experiment with high impact value in terms of children learning about an extremely complicated yet necessary system.

*When I became the Library Minister I was really happy. It was really fun promoting the elections. I was never allowed to take part in any of the school activities. But, I maintain the Library here.*

*- Aarti Kumari, ex library minister, 15 years old*



Through the secret ballot system, there is a re-election process every month to ensure that every child has an opportunity of becoming the minister of the library. She/he maintains a register of all the books in the library, lends and collects books and is in charge of updating the list of books they need. She/ he also takes decisions in the library through the active participation of all the children. An opportunity to become the minister ensured that children inculcated leadership skills. It also ensured that children understood the importance of casting out their votes at a very young age. It's been a year and no child has ever lost or torn a book! Children value each and every book. The children have been doing a commendable job managing the library and have shown great responsibility and integrity.'

The library also plays an important role in imbibing self confidence among the children. Children from these communities are often denied opportunities in their schools due to the stigma associated with their caste status and thus, the Library gives them a much-needed space to learn and grow. The library has also evolved into a powerful tool that motivates children to understand themselves as well as the society! In a yet another innovative process, we facilitated Children writing about themselves and their lives. They started discussing their learnings from every book they would read. Eventually, regular discussions on various social issues were being held. Children would often relate these discussions to the events of their own lives. For eg; when children spoke on the issue of child labour, they brought in their personal narratives of working in informal units as labour. The depth in the insights that children brought in these discussions left all of us pleasantly surprised. Another striking example of the impact through these discussions was seen when children started planting saplings after discussing the Chipko movement. They understood a resistance movement of the past and added meaning to it in the present.



The Library in Chitkohara was developed overtime with the support of these children. We often underestimate children's ability to create or make best decisions for themselves but the library showcases how effective they can be, provided they are trusted and backed for their ideas. Placing our trust in them was an important step in the entire process that motivated them to be responsible individuals and run the library independently. These children are the first in their family lineage to receive education; access to a library has opened a new world of knowledge for them. Defying all odds, they have been able to create a space for themselves where they can learn and encourage other young minds as well. It gives us a beautiful message of determination that children have in their hearts to create a better future for themselves.

## TEAM SPEAKS

*We care more about the things in which we are emotionally invested. The children are invested in the community Library in the same way. I thought that children might not be able to take this responsibility, but they changed my perception. If children are trusted, they will accomplish much.*

-Nilesh Kamble

They understood a resistance movement of the past and added meaning to it in the present.



**PRIYANKA AIDASANI  
INTERN, MUMBAI**

# GOING DOWN THE MEMORY LANE

## LESSONS OF LIFE FROM BEGGARS HOME

I have to begin by expressing my gratitude to the universe have blessed me with an internship with the most generous team of social workers, starting from Taarique sir to my ever-compassionate supervisor Pallavi Ma'am to the team of people that she leads namely; Shashi Dada, Ana Ma'am, Vidhi Ma'am, Pravin Sir and Shekhar Dada; everyone is a pleasure to be around. But I have special regards for Pallavi ma'am, because from the day we began interning (and by we, I mean Clarissa and I, who started interning around the same time) she was so willing to teach us and mentor us in any way possible. The way she spoke to the clients (Koshish refers to the inmates at Beggars home as their clients) was so respectful and effortless that it was very inspiring just to watch her. I try to imbibe her patience, openness and compassion and sometimes I even catch myself speaking like her, or imitating her nuances! Of the several other internships I have had, I have never once encountered a woman with a more generous soul than hers and it is such a delight to be under her guidance. So, there is a lot to feel grateful for.

During my internship at Beggars Home with Koshish, I have learnt as much about destitution as I have about myself. It's funny because I never thought that this small experience would help me so much in understanding myself and the world, and the role that I want to play in this world. I have a few lessons that I think are invaluable that I would like to remember for the rest of my life.

### **1: Rich or poor, we are all puppets of fate.**

Beggars home in Chembur is an institution certified by the State of Maharashtra where people found to be begging are detained under the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act. Ironically, from what I observed, most of the people at beggars home are not beggars at all but just victims of misfortune. There are people from all different kinds of background at Beggars Home, from people on the streets to qualified professionals, you will find them all. More than beggars, this institution is used to put people who have been abandoned by the country in some way, who have fallen prey to the bad infrastructure and have never been able to find their way back; people with no money, people with mental illnesses, victims of abuse, people with disability and some people who are there simply there by accident. And that is the reality, I think, people are criminalised not for a crime that they might have committed, but for not being able to access the help they needed, or not being able to pay for it.

I was never able to see the women at Beggars Home as criminals or inmates. To me they were regular, quirky- and-cute humans with complicated stories. The word criminal makes it out to look like there's something wrong with them, something abnormal, but no, that isn't the case, these women, if you met them, you would want to hang out with them, much like Clarissa and I liked to do. there are distinct and interesting things about each one of them, say, Neha is very dominating



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but ever-so-loving towards her cat. Sheetal, I am convinced was destined to come to Beggars Home to find a shy soulmate in Anita, and Anita in Sheetal! Lani, who cannot, to save her life stay silent during meditation, has the weirdest obsessions with crabs. And like these, there are many more women at Beggars Home, who could have their own sit-coms because they're just that quirky. During my time there, I realised that, it is nothing but a random chance of fate that has set me apart from the people at beggars home. A random set of unfortunate events that has caused them to be institutionalised at beggars home, a random set of unfortunate events that can happen to anyone. With a little bit of bad luck, I could easily be in their place and with a little bit of good luck, they they could easily be in mine.

There is no difference between them and me, and my experience with Koshish has constantly reiterated this truth, and it is truly humbling for me because it reminds me of the equality of the human race, that not only are we all made of the same genetic material but we are all equally helpless to our circumstances sometimes, and so being kind to them becomes even more important because I know that in some parallel universe, I could be them.

## **2. To be beautiful, well, you have to do nothing.**



Even though they wear no make-up at all, I find all the women at Beggars Home to be beautiful. Seema is secretly my favourite, she is very cute, she is a team-player who always like to participate in all the My Space activities, and every time she smiles with all her teeth out, she looks so beautiful! So, this is the lesson, if you want to look beautiful, you just have to be like Seema, and well, do nothing, because beauty does not lie in appearance.

## **3. Acceptance is Beautiful**

One of my favourite moments was re-uniting a client with her family. Her name was Reena, she had come to Beggars Home on remand. Although slightly disturbed, she was able to tell me her home address properly and gave me all her details accurately. I contacted The nearest police

station to her house and spoke to Inspector Karshi at Kurundwad Police station; he was very polite and and helpful was able to find her house and family members within a couple of hours.

When the family came to get her a couple of days later, she was wearing a new sari, I remember telling her that she looked beautiful, she let out a broken smile, again much like Seema's it wasn't a Colgate smile, but it made me so happy. Her husband and mother-in-law were relieved to see her, they told us that Reena had left the house a couple of times, and that she had stopped taking her psychiatric medication and a bunch of other unsettling details. What is most interesting about this moment is that, despite all the trouble her family had to take to come from Kolhapur to Bombay, spend all that time and money that they didn't have to take home a very troubled woman who kept running from them; they were still relieved to have found her and were happy to receive her again. It wasn't a perfect moment, but their acceptance made it so.

## **4. Mental Illnesses are Universal**

The most important thing that has happened to me is that my relationship to mental health has changed. Before interning at Koshish, I felt ashamed of having mental health issues, because despite having read books on depression and anxiety, going to therapists, and done everything that I could have done, I somewhere still had this silly impression that mental illnesses only happened to privileged people who had no responsibilities and no purpose, but when I met the women at beggars home, I realised how universal these illnesses are, that just like misfortune, mental illnesses do not discriminate, they can happen to anyone at anytime

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It's funny how we use all these words to differentiate between different kinds of people, rich-poor, east-west, fair-dark, Hindu-Muslim-Christian etc, and of course that is a function of language i.e. to create meaning through differentiation, but my internship at Koshish actually reminded me that, we are all very alike, we all feel the same emotions of shame, anger, sadness, happiness, love, betrayal, confusion etc; it just so happens that sometimes we look a little different, and that, I hope does not unnerve us.



# LIFE HAPPENS AT BEGGARS HOME

*Our journey with Pooja (name changed) and her daughter Priya (name changed) began in 2015, when we met them in Beggars Home, Chembur, Mumbai. Since then, she has been walking ahead in life with her head held high.*

*The narrative below portrays the journey of a single young mother and her zeal to create a better world for her daughter and herself.*

**A**t twenty years of age, in the year 2004, Pooja left her home in Howrah, Kolkata to come to the city of dreams, Mumbai. While Pooja worked as a domestic worker in her hometown, she came to Mumbai craving for a life filled with better opportunities. She was timid, scared, nervous, but was eager to begin her new life. However, in a city filled with people searching for employment, Pooja struggled to survive and had to resort to dancing in a bar to earn a living. In a year or so, she lost only her source of income when the Maharashtra Government banned dance bars in Mumbai. She felt extremely discouraged but found hope when she fell in love with a man and got married to him. In a couple of years, Pooja was pregnant and was filled with joy when she gave birth to her beautiful daughter, Priya. A few months after Priya was born, her husband moved to Dubai to find better employment and cut ties with both of them. Pooja felt lonely, betrayed, hurt; and could feel the world crumbling before her eyes. She was also in an extremely vulnerable condition as she had the responsibility of taking care of her small child without any support in the city. She loved her daughter dearly and wanted the best for her but could barely make ends meet.



Their financial situation kept deteriorating and she began selling her household items to ensure that they did not sleep on an empty stomach. In the end, their situation worsened to such an extent that Pooja and her daughter were on the streets without a roof on their head. At this point in life, Pooja was broken from within and was filled with anguish. In a state of complete despair, she went to the Kurla Court with her two-year old daughter to seek help. She was produced before the magistrate; and was sent to Beggars' Home, Mumbai under the Bombay Prevention of Beggary Act 1959, in the year 2015.

When we met Pooja in Beggars Home, she was quiet, scared, lonely and sad. We decided to shift both of them to Kasturba Mahila Vastigruh Shelter Home, instead of keeping Pooja for the entire remand period at Beggars' Home. This decision was important in order to focus on their complete rehabilitation which would be difficult to accomplish during the remand period. Ensuring Pooja's rehabilitation was extremely crucial as it would also decide Priya's future. During Pooja's stay at the open shelter, we developed a warm relationship with her.

While she poured her heart out to us, we made sure to listen to her and support her. Her daughter Priya was also provided with a loving and caring environment. Pooja began participating in activities that would make her feel joyful. She also began attending our vocational training classes to learn stitching where she received a monthly stipend. These classes motivated her to pursue independence in life. We prepared her identification documents and opened a bank account for her so that she could start saving for her daughter and herself. In the meantime, we began tracing her husband and through different contacts we were able to get in touch with him in Dubai. He transferred 10,000 rupees which was used to rent a room for Pooja and her daughter. We provided her with an additional rent for the next two months, ration supplies and other basic essential amenities so that she could begin her life afresh.



She began working in a factory, enrolled her daughter in a school and continues to work hard to sustain their lives. Through perseverance and grit, she embarked on her path of attaining self-independence.

A few months ago, we asked Pooja to apply for the position of a security guard at Kasturba Mahila Vastigruh Shelter Home. Now, at the age of thirty-six, Pooja works at the same place where she began our journey with us. Her beautiful daughter Priya is now seven years and studies in the second grade. Because of constant change in timings of her shifts; Pooja had to enrol her daughter in a hostel close to an English medium school away from her. While this step was difficult for her as a mother, she believed it was the right decision for herself and her daughter.

Our bond with Pooja has been a meaningful one. We have been witnessing her grow stronger over the past few years. She is still very quiet and soft spoken, but has imbibed a sense of confidence and motivation to do well in life. Despite several adversities she hasn't grown bitter to life and is very hopeful about her future with her daughter.

Pooja's life is a wonderful reminder to all of us to believe in the fact that complete rehabilitation is possible when people are provided with support, care and comfort. Her life also gives us an assurance that even when circumstances fail people, there is always hope.

# REBUILDING LIVES

*Communities that we work with live their lives on the edge. One adverse push and their lives are off whatever little stability they have. Uprooting is the order of their lives. One such incident took place, when fire broke out at Lal Bagh Community and most of the 300 hutments were destroyed completely. It took almost two years for people to rebuild what was lost day by day, step by step.*

*Through this photo story, we are taking our readers through the journey over the two years and show how people's grit and determination saw them rebuilding their lives.*



1. Fire destroys everything. Nothing is spared.



6. People of the community build an anganwadi that also doubles as a community center.



2. Immediate relief and support is provided by Koshish and other civil society groups. They also work tirelessly to aid government compensation.



7. People own and maintain the anganwadi that is set up.



3. Everybody comes together. Youth volunteers are identified to lead the work of rebuilding their settlement.



8. The settlement is not just rebuilt, it is better. Now, it has a computer learning facility.



4. People are rebuilding not just their houses, but also their lives.



9. Life is slowly getting back to usual.



5. While fixing their structures, people also fix their hopes.



10. Signs of devastation still remain. But greater are the signs of human resilience and courage.



# TEAM BUILDING PROCESS



## MAHARASHTRA TEAM

21-23 FEBRUARY,  
2020

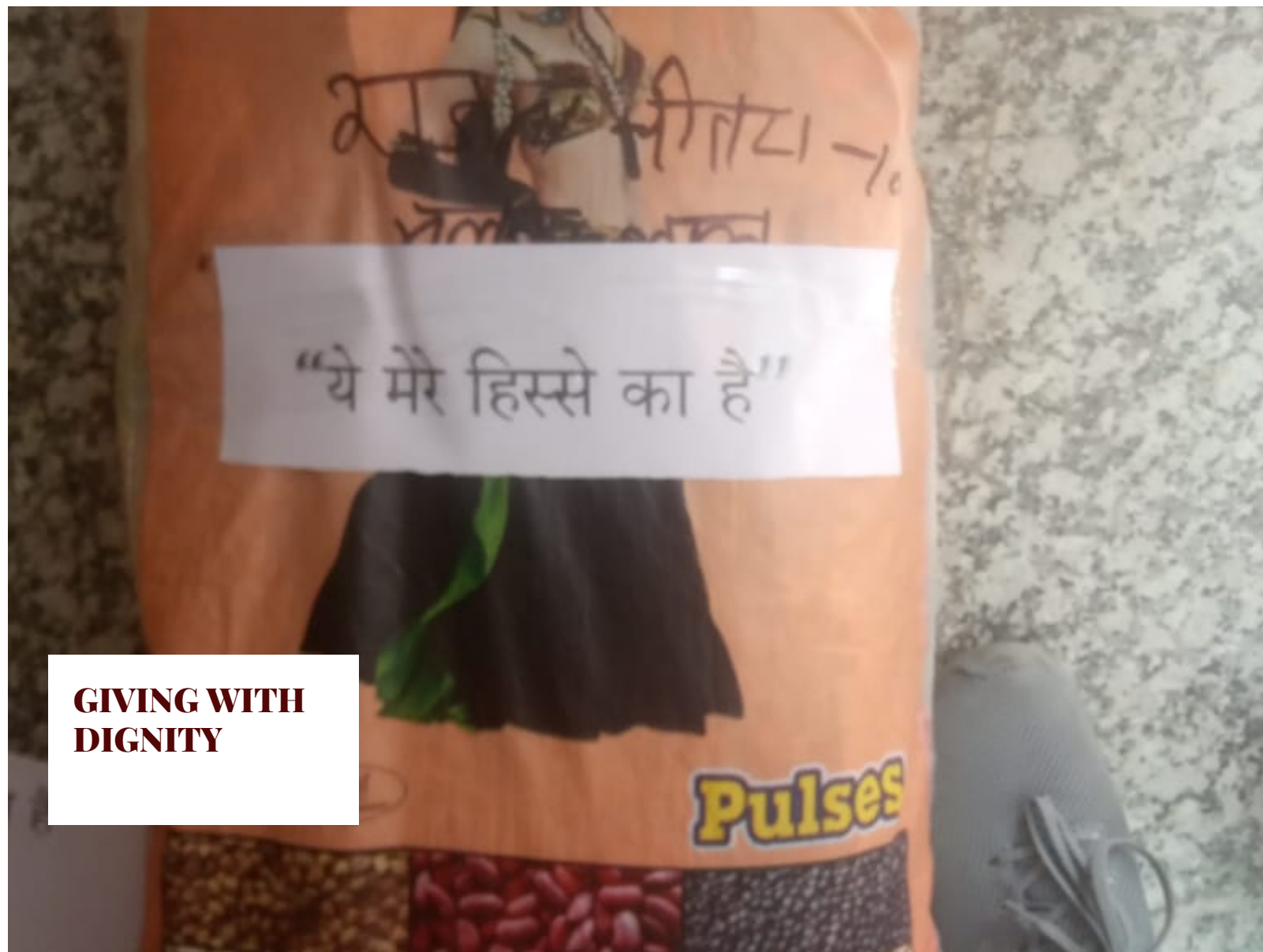
Working in a challenging setup where stories of trauma are a daily occurrence can pave the way for a pessimistic outlook in life. Not being bogged down by structural obstacles, and striving everyday to help the underprivileged can be quite demanding both physically and emotionally. The work culture at Koshish recognizes the need for Self-care as well as creating a team centric structural back up, forged on trust and empathy, to guide each other through rough days.

Just before COVID -19, the Maharashtra team visited Matheran in February 2020, for a team building process. The residential workshop was anchored by Mr.Ankit Dwivedi and Ms.Vaidehi Chilwarwar well known experts for group processing. They used drama inspired activities, art therapy and empathy building exercises to encourage Introspection, clear interpersonal communication and mindfulness.

A couple of days, away from the daily motions, made to think and feel, exposed to nature, offered space to the forgotten parts of the self to re-emerge. It was a therapeutic process, which left the team rejuvenated and filled with gratitude.



# COVID-19 RELIEF WORK INTERVENTIONS



**GIVING WITH  
DIGNITY**

**K**oshish has always responded to crisis situations, especially the disasters and this time was no different. Much before the lockdown was brought in, homeless people started losing their jobs as people began maintaining distances. Our intervention can be divided into 3 verticals i.e. direct relief in the institutions, assistance in the communities where we work and thirdly, the advocacy work where we made use of government systems to extend benefits to our groups. We have been carrying out relief work in different places where we have our teams and programs i.e. Mumbai, Nagpur, Delhi and Patna. We also facilitated relief distribution in Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh through our alliance partner organizations.

Our intervention in institutions started from February end. We started providing additional diet to the residents (to enhance the immunity as most of the people reaching institutions have very low immunity and therefore, greater risk and vulnerability for getting infected.) We also provided masks, sanitisers, hand wash soaps, etc.

In open communities, we have been providing dry rations since the time lockdown was announced. Apart from this direct support, we have also been assisting relief work carried out by government agencies and other civil society groups. We registered homeless families from our outreach areas under government scheme and facilitated with government to ensure that all the registered people received assistance as per the government norms. To meet the growing need of cooked meals, we coordinated with municipal authorities and connected several thousand daily wage workers and homeless citizens at multiple locations with the concerned authorities for supply of cooked meals.

All state units have been following up on earlier clients who were reintegrated with their families and finding out about their situation and needs. Psycho social support is being extended to all such families and whenever there is specific need for ation, medicines etc, monetary support is being extended to that client.



We also provided monetary help to many families in different locations. Though we avoided providing cash, there were several families that were given money given the circumstances they faced. For example, many families with babies needed money to buy milk. Due to restrictions on movement, it was impossible for us to go every day, therefore, a rough estimation was made about the tentative expenses for milk and vegetables and money was given to the women in the family.

As part of advocacy intervention, we brought up the issue of custodial populations with authorities concerned. Apart from demanding immediate relief to residents and lobbying for immediate intervention in otherwise neglected institutions, we were able to get large number of persons who knew their homes, released from Beggars' Home, Mumbai. We advocated for the arrests to be stopped so that new people were not brought to the institutions. Only clients with mental health issues or elderly having nowhere to go to were staying in the institutions. We also wrote to Amicus in a Supreme Court matter on overcrowding and ways to prevent the spread in prisons and child care institutions.

If crisis brings out the best from humanity, it can also bring out the worst. It has been extremely disturbing to see how relief distribution was turned into a photo opportunity. We not just resisted such relief distribution but also ran an online campaign around 'Giving with Dignity'. Taking the challenge of building a society that cares and looks after its vulnerable population, we initiated campaign on social media to raise concerns about compromising dignity of people and have received tremendous response for it. Several groups wrote/ called up acknowledging our position and thanked us for flagging it.

Our community volunteers came as a huge support given the restriction of movement. They enabled us to respond to calls for support coming from various parts of the city. Difficulty in procuring medicines, especially for psychiatric treatment was one major challenge. Gaps in communication from government agencies and ambiguity around the relief measures announced created chaos within the homeless groups. Absence of shelters where people could be shifted was another challenge as people were scared of moving to temporary camps set up by government agencies with hundreds of people residing and feared getting infected.

Some of our interventions provided immediate relief while a few were aimed at long term systemic response. We shall continue with all relief related support, till the time situation is stabilised. We will also continue with our intervention with custodial/ institutional populations. Another area of intervention has been mitigating the psychosocial effect on homeless population, especially on children. Fear of uncertainty is causing trauma and we can clearly see that happening. This will require a long-term investment in getting people out of that.

We shall continue with the follow up on former clients. The post lockdown period may see withdrawal or decrease in the support that family extends to reintegrated clients, especially those with mental illness. Koshish will ensure that all such clients receive necessary support and any possibility of them getting abandoned is prevented.

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# ON THE FIELD

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## 6599 Ration Kits were distributed

The ration kits included necessary food items and personal hygiene items.

## 4400 individuals sensitized

Meetings were organized where different communities( that we work with) participated. Issues about COVID 19 Lockdown & access to State sponsored relief were discussed. Sanitization kits were also provided.

## 2,40,100 cooked meals were facilitated

Communities were linked with State Municipal Corporations involved in the Meals distribution. Leaders were identified in different communities and consequently a follow up was maintained about provision of cooked meals twice a day.

## 455 Travel Kits given

Several families travelled on foot to their home states during the lockdown. Travel kits which included snacks, water and fruits were provided to these families.

## 993 families were linked to Govt. schemes

Families across the country were connected to relevant and specific government schemes to ensure that they could avail different benefits.

## 220 individuals received Medical Assistance

Medicines and medical check ups were facilitated to pregnant women, psychiatric patients and individuals with chronic issues. In addition 79 clients from Beggars' Home and communities from Delhi and Mumbai were vaccinated.

## 257 individuals received Monetary Support

Several families required money due to their personal situations. Subsequently, support was offered, giving these individuals the dignity and freedom to spend this money for their needs.

## ACT OF COMPASSION

Koshish has been working at Lalbagh Community at Mansarover Park, Shahdara since few years now. It's the settlement of about 300 families, mostly from de-notified communities engaged in odd jobs like selling old clothes, Lemon-Chilli threads, drum players, cart-pushing etc. The community survives on daily earnings and therefore has been facing a very difficult time since the Covid-19 situation arose.

Geographically, the community is located close to the road that goes to interstate bus terminus that migrant workers walked to, in the hope of boarding buses for their native places. On hearing the plight of walking workers, youth from the community decided to 'do something' to make the sufferings little bearable.

Themselves being out of work for several months, there was little that people had, except for the rare ability to feel others' pain and some grains they received as 'relief support'. They decided to use the rations to feed these walking people. Several families came together and brought portions of whatever little ration they had on them.

Women of the community made chapatis while men prepared 'khichdi'. Rotis were packed with pickle and group of youth went and distributed these packets to people walking from the highway. They decided to continue this for as long as they had any ration left on them and ran this effort for more than a week.

Even earlier also the same community decided to give away a tempo of relief material that came for them, to a neighbouring settlement that had not received any help from anywhere. They held a community meeting and took a collective decision.

Nothing but this kind of empathy alone would determine what would we carry as memories about this pandemic. Whether it will be period of helplessness or that of solidarity would depend entirely on how strongly we stand and hold each other.





# JOIN US



*Every support, small or big is significant. Every rupee contributed, every minute spent as a volunteer, every feedback given as a well wisher has its impact in the rehabilitation of a person. You are welcome to support us in a manner that suits you best. None of our achievements would have been possible without your generosity and faith in us.*

*We value your suggestions and always look forward to ways of improving our programs. For any feedback please feel free to write to us @ [koshish@tiss.edu](mailto:koshish@tiss.edu)*

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