

## **Barefoot: Worlds apart**

By

**HARSH MANDER**

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Sometimes just a thin red brick wall can seem like the distance between two different planets...A red brick wall encloses the sprawling, shaded campus of India's finest business school, the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. On the pavement just on the other side of this wall live a large cluster of homeless families — rag pickers, construction workers and beggars. One of my students, Manish Verma, remarks on the irony that 'a mere 100 meters separate the lives of those who wage a battle with hunger each day, and those who wage a battle for securing a high-paying job out of the best business school in India'. The chasm that separates life on the two sides of this brick wall seems the distance between two planets, separated by light years.

I accepted an invitation three years ago to teach a semester course every year on poverty and governance to the MBA students in this business school. The challenge of speaking about hunger, homelessness, want and discrimination to a classroom of some of the brightest achievers in the country — who, within months of my course, would be recruited to jobs which would easily place them in the top one per cent income bracket in the country — was daunting. But I found my students intelligent, engaged and caring, as young people anywhere are. A different exercise instead of an examination at the end of the course, I asked my students every year to each find one impoverished person, in Ahmedabad or elsewhere, and try to learn about their lives, write their stories, and share these with their classmates. Their first reaction was usually one of understandable panic: how could they cross distances imposed by history, class, power, language and so much else; they were convinced that these were insurmountable.

I assured them that what was required was no more than one human being reaching out to another, and if they could approach them with true respect and empathy, the people they were trying to learn from would, in all probability, reciprocate. For each hesitant young woman and man in my classroom, this became a personal adventure of reaching out and beyond, into places of the heart and mind they had never explored. Each came back to recount the wonder of unsuspected lives, of the struggles, dreams, triumphs and the spirit behind every humble, begrimed face. The words of student Pooja Jayaraman, after her moving encounter with Jyoti, a single, widowed construction worker on the new IIM campus, echoed in many student accounts: 'As I walked away that day I asked myself if I had been in the same situation, would I have shown as much courage as she did?' They learnt not pity but respect. Many also were astonished by how hospitable and welcoming these dispossessed persons were to the students who visited them. At the time the students entered my classroom, they had spent nearly two years living in the IIM campus. On the pavements outside the campus, interspersed between the homeless residents — what one student aptly called homeless homes — are innumerable stalls selling street food, cigarettes, DVDs, magazines, newspapers. It is here that the students gather long hours most

evenings, to 'chill and hang out'. They would have passed their homeless neighbours literally several hundred times these two years. But they never before thought of them as people with worthy stories. A homeless rag-picker Anand Bhai lives with his family on the pavement adjacent to the walls of IIM Ahmedabad. He shows Manish Verma his part of the footpath, which houses about 50 such families of rag-pickers, and says, 'Whatever you see within the enclosure of this part of the footpath is mine'. Manish describes what he sees on those 10 feet of pavement, which 'houses his family, a wooden cart used for collecting scrap, four steel utensils, a couple of jute bags stitched together and a small tent.

That is all Anand Bhai can claim to own under the sun'. A typical day in his life 'consists of waking up every morning at 6 a.m. and leaving with his fellow rag pickers for a day of work that includes picking up bits of paper, plastic bags, empty mineral water bottles and pretty much anything that can be exchanged for money'. His children are uneducated and beg for money during the day, typically collecting about Rs. 10 or 20 each after a day's hard work. Describing the uncertainty of what the family can eat at the end of each day, Manish uses a metaphor for hunger which only a business student could: 'The food itself is as unpredictable as the movements of the BSE Sensex.

If the day goes well and Anand Bhai is able to pocket a hundred rupee note, he comes to the part of the footpath he calls home with a piece of chicken, a few tomatoes, onions and coriander to relish what he calls a grand feast. On gloomy days when the earnings are restricted to about fifty rupees, the dinner consists of boiled potatoes and onions with chappatis'. Before parting, his unusual visitor asks him one last question: 'What are your ambitions for your children; what do you want them to be when they grow up?' He replies: 'They are the children of a rag picker and will become rag pickers'. Bleak prospects A similar matter-of-fact absence of hope marks the life of another homeless rag-picker, Abhishek Gopal and Sougata Basu discovers that he was born on the streets of Ahmedabad, and lived all 30 years of his life on the same stretch of road. Sanjay Bhai's family consists of his mother, his wife and two children, a boy and a girl. He sets out with his entire family early every morning with a hired wooden cart to collect rags, separating them into different categories like iron, bottles, glass and so on, and selling them to a nearby dealer in exchange for money. He too believes that nothing will change in their lives, and his son will grow up to be a rag-picker like him. Spaces called home Megha Jain evocatively describes the 'home' of another homeless rag-picker. 'On the pavement, Kanti has carved out a small space that he calls home.

They have a thin cotton mattress and a couple of old blankets. Some utensils and a large shiny radio-cum-cassette player make up the rest of his movable possessions. The home is defined by a tiny earthen chullah on the edge of the road and a string hung along the wall with some clothes on it. In the mornings they defecate in the open field about 300 metres away. When they leave for work, they roll up all their possessions and dump them behind a wall or some bushes. They aren't really worth stealing, so they have no fear'. Marly Diallo, an overseas Exchange Student, writes about Sabina, a young mother about 30, who recently gave birth to her fourth boy. She

'lives on a pavement, in front of a road that I take almost every day, without really asking myself how these people live there. Sabina has been living just behind the walls of IIMA for years'. She adds, 'Sabina keeps their belongings on a ground protected by a fence; all the families can keep their valuables in plastic bags stocked in this area. Otherwise, she keeps her stuff on the pavement. At night or when it rains, the family gathers under a thin plastic tarpaulin, just like everybody does in this street'. She adds, 'We asked them if they benefited from the presence of IIMA in terms of security or help? The answer was clear and sad... there is no interaction with IIMA, just as if these two worlds co-existed without seeing each other'.