A Place to Sleep

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Every night on my way home, I am hit with the same missile of guilt. The wait at the traffic signal seems longer as I witness rows and rows of dusty bodies lying next to each other. There are long and skinny legs, bony legs and tiny ones squirming to find a space in between, a space that will give them a few hours of total oblivion. I see this scene every day but it never fails to shock me out of my comfort zone. Here I am sinking into my self-indulgent bubble, my cocoon of self pity and recrimination against imagined or real injustices, when out there, under the open sky, lie hundreds of people, exposed to the elements, jostling with other legs, arms and heads, to escape to that wonderful state of being - sleep.



Photo: Syed Zakir Hossain

The images are perfect for some heart wrenching photojournalism. An old labourer, drunk with exhaustion in his little basket that serves as working tool by day and bed by night. Two little toddlers pushing each other for space, bare bodied, ribs showing and barefoot with their sleeping mother next to them. A trio of young men - maybe 18 or 20-year-olds, laughing at something. They are on the pavements, lying side by side the strip in front of the Karwan Bazar underpass, outside the steps in front of office buildings, any little unoccupied space they can find. Amazingly, many of them are sound asleep, despite the loud honking and heavy trucks and buses zooming only inches away, despite the noxious clouds of dust and smog that hang over them.

A perverse poet may even call them 'free', free from the confinement of walls, doors, locks and keys; from the fear of intruders.

The truth is of course neither poetic nor pretty. They represent the 'unimportant' dispensable class, the ones who scurry along in the crowds doing the dirty, dangerous menial jobs, the ones who are invisible even in broad daylight. The streets are their workplace and their home. They are nomads, moving with their circumstances: when the security guards shoo them away, when the cars come too close to park, when the local mastaan decides that someone else is entitled to that tiny piece of street.

Sometimes coming to work, when I am not so preoccupied with myself, I see them cooking rice in a corner, washing themselves, their infants defecating near the drains. Sometimes I see young men and women lying in a drug-induced stupor to fight off the futility of their existence.

Such an appalling state of existence should not be accepted in any civilised society. Yet everyday the pavements seem a little more crowded as more and more people lose their ability to have a roof over their heads. This is the brutal reality of living in the city. Joblessness and hunger drive people to the cities where there is paid work but living is at a subhuman level. In the absence of any kind of social security system, the urban poor are left to fend for themselves. Apart from a few NGO initiatives hardly any attention is being given to the poor city dwellers. It is not enough to have a few private organisations running free schools or sporadic health camps. It is not enough to feed the hungry on special occasions. While rural development is essential to reduce the number of migrants looking for work in the cities, what about the millions of poor who are already here, who must somehow survive in this unkind city? Where are the state-run shelter homes and hospitals, the philanthropists and do-gooders who have resources to change this scenario of bleakness into one of dignity and hope?

Of course it's easy to lay the blame on other shoulders. I am home now, in my comfortable bed on a full stomach; there is electricity and the fan gives just the right amount of coolness to soothe my nerves. My head is tucked into the soft pillows; I have clean sheets over the mattress and a nice cosy blanket in case I feel a little chilly. But despite all this luxury the one thing that is most precious at this time--sleep--frustratingly, eludes me.