

BEGGING THE QUESTION

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The writer is chairman, Economic Advisory Council to the PM. Views are personal.

An unstarred question on beggary was answered in the Lok Sabha on March 8, 2016, by the minister of state for social justice and empowerment. According to Census 2011, the total number of beggars and vagrants in India is 4,13,670 — 2,21,673 males and 1,91,997 females. State-wise, with an aggregate of 81,244, West Bengal leads by a considerable margin, followed by Uttar Pradesh. These numbers differ slightly from the figures given in the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment's 'Handbook on Social Welfare Statistics' (January 2016). The handbook has two sets of numbers from two separate sources — Census 2011 and SECC, 2011 (rural). From Census 2011, there are 3,72,217 beggars and vagrants in India, 1,97,725 males and 1,74,492 females.

What is a vagrant and why do we still use such a term? Several states have anti-beggary legislation — Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab, Sikkim, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, West Bengal and Delhi. There can be an entirely legitimate debate about the working and refinement of this anti-beggary legislation, but that's not the focus of this column. The word "vagrant" is a colonial legacy from the English poor laws, reflective of the belief that able-bodied poor must be made to compulsorily work and not laze around.

England had a Vagabonds and Beggars Act in 1494. This went through several versions and eventually became the Vagrants Act 1824. We still carry vestigial legacies of such notions in sections of the CrPC (Criminal Procedure Code). What is the difference between a vagrant and a beggar? A vagrant has no fixed abode and wanders around. Is a vagrant a beggar who roams around? Is a non-beggar who roams around a vagrant? By that definition, a religious mendicant is a vagrant. These are legal issues and can be only pinned down through a piece of legislation. In that list of state-specific legislation, all but two mention beggary, not vagrancy.

The two that mention vagrancy are the Bengal Vagrancy Act (1943) and Cochin Vagrancy Act (1945), applicable to some parts of Kerala. For West Bengal, "Vagrant means a person found asking for alms in any public place, or wandering about or remaining in any public place in such condition or manner as makes it likely that such person exists by asking for alms but does not include a person collecting money or asking for food or gifts for a prescribed purpose." Cochin has similar provisions. As I said, though the legislation may be directed against beggary, itinerant or stationary, it seems to legally cover religious mendicants.

As everyone knows, a kumbh is under way in Prayagraj. When I visited the kumbh, I was told 1,00,000 sadhus have temporarily set up abode there. How does one know the number? I didn't get a satisfactory answer. I can understand some sanctity associated with the figure if the sadhu is a member of one of the recognised akhadas. But not every sadhu is a member of an akhada.

Broadening the question, how many sadhus/sannyasis are there in India? Broadening it even further, how many religious mendicants (irrespective of religion) are there? Typically, censuses should give answers. Indeed, pre-Independence censuses did collect such figures. For example,

in 1911, there were 9,79,293 fakirs, 8,14,365 yogis and 6,98,036 mendicants. Unless I have missed something, censuses today don't collect these numbers. Take the household Census 2011 schedule, which is focused on main workers and marginal workers, with few questions for non-workers. If I am a non-worker, I tick one of several options. I can say "beggar", or I can say "other". Since "other" isn't disaggregated further, I think the census should simply say "beggar" and not "beggar and vagrant".

To return to the question of religious mendicants, what happens? There is no household to be visited. How do I get numbers, if at all? There have been cases where courts have barred sanyasis from getting involved in property disputes. If you have become a sanyasi, you have severed all links with this world, including property rights. So runs the argument. At kumbh, my wife asked a Naga sanyasi about the watch he was wearing. That answer isn't important. More importantly, he unhappily complained that thanks to being the head of an akhada, he now had to open a bank account (for the akhada) and, therefore, get an [Aadhaar](#) number, against the principles of sanyasa.

Thus, sanyasis have started to get legal identities. Do they have census identifies? The ministry's handbook also provides figures from SECC (rural). The heading isn't "beggars and vagrants". It is "households engaged in begging, charity and alms collection", which seems to be a broader category. The SECC question is also fairly broad. It asks about the main source of household income and has a possible response of begging/charity/alms collection. We are given a figure of 6,68,479 households in rural India. For rural India, Census 2011 gives a figure of 2,36,850 individuals. Though they belong to the same year, there are several reasons why one can't directly compare the census with the SECC. In any event, both use the household as a unit and religious mendicants are outside this unit.

Hence, I think we had better numbers for religious mendicants in 1911 than in 2011, or 2019. If you are asked for a figure, say 2.5 lakhs. That was roughly the figure in 1911. With a 2.5 lakh base, one lakh at the kumbh is plausible.

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