

# Begging in history

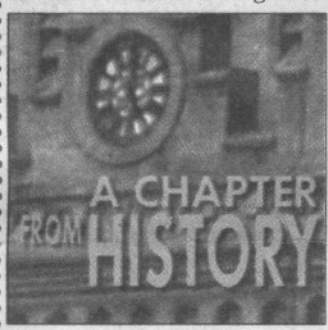
Handwritten notes: "Daily people", "Begging", "Dawin", "12-1-03"

EVERYDAY, we come across countless beggars who harass us and use all sorts of methods to get alms. However, the phenomenon of begging is not new. We find it throughout history and in all those societies where the distribution of wealth was uneven and the gap between the rich and the poor was enormous. Those who possessed resources were unwilling to part with them; and those who were poor and needy demanded their share from the surplus in possession of the rich. So, in actuality, it was not begging but sharing. The demand emerged when there was famine, drought, unemployment and such social and political crises that deprived people from earning their livelihood. Finding no other alternative, they resorted to begging or asking for their share from those who had more.

Generally, historians do not regard the subject interesting enough to record the activities of beggars in different periods, and how it reflected the attitude of society towards the problem of poverty. However, finding some information, an attempt is made to construct the changing attitude of beggary in history. During the mediæval period in the West as well as the East, beggars were regarded as holy men and respected by society. To feed or to provide financial subsistence to them was an act of piety that was highly appreciated. The concept was that the alms-giver would get rewards in the hereafter in his munificence. Beggars, knowing the religious sensibilities of the people, invoked religion to get alms and charity. Their practice was to go door to door and beg. Housewives, who provided them with food, requested them to pray for the well-being of their families. On festivals and ceremonies, people were generous in giving them alms in the spirit of sharing.

In India, giving alms to beggars is a centuries-old tradition. Nobles and rich traders, to earn a good name and reputation, helped the poor and arranged *langar* (free food) on various occasions. Kings and emperors also made it a point to give alms. About the Mughal emperor, Akbar, Abul Fazl writes in *A'in-i Akbari*: "There is a treasure always waiting at the court; and every beggar, when His Majesty sees him, is sure to find relief."

As beggars had no property and belongings, and no worldly ambitions, they acquired respect as men who were close to God; and it was believed that their prayers as well as curses were granted. Beggars were respectfully called *fakir* (who possessed one day's sufficiency for self and family), *baba* (father or respectable old man) and *sæen* (mister or sir). As they were free from all worldly problems and enjoyed life, many envied them. On this aspect, Richard Brome, an English poet, writes:



*The only freemen of a common-wealth; Free about scot-free; that observe no law, Obey no governor, use no religion, But what they draw from their old custom Or constitutes themselves. Yet are no rebel.*

Besides this, beggars adopted different methods to appeal to the sentiments of the people. Some of them played music and sang songs; and some attracted people by disfiguring their bodies. There is an interesting poem written by Robert Crowley, in 1550, that can be applied even today in our surroundings:

*I heard two beggars that under an hedge sate, Who did with long talk their matters debate. They had both sore legs most loathsome to see, All raw from the foot well most to the knee, 'My leg', quoth the one, 'I thank God is fair'. 'So is mine', quoth the other, 'in a cold air', For then it looketh raw and as red as any blood, I would not have it healed for any world' good. No man would pity me but my sore leg, Wherefore if I*

even today in our surroundings:

*I heard two beggars that under an hedge sate, Who did with long talk their matters debate. They had both sore legs most loathsome to see, All raw from the foot well most to the knee, 'My leg', quoth the one, 'I thank God is fair'. 'So is mine', quoth the other, 'in a cold air', For then it looketh raw and as red as any blood, I would not have it healed for any world' good. No man would pity me but my sore leg, Wherefore if I were whole I might in vain beg.*

Besides ordinary beggars there were some religious sects who adopted begging as their livelihood, such as Franciscans and Dominicans in Christianity. In order to be independent from state and church, they relied on society for sustenance and resorted to begging. In the Buddhist traditions, the Bhikshus go door to door and beg. Even the king of Thailand, once a year, dons a Bhikshu dress and begs. There are two reasons for this: one, to shun off any sense of arrogance and inculcate humility. Secondly, having no property and lust for life, they devote their time in praying and meditation, that earns the respect of society. Hence, they become spiritual guides to the people. It also gives them freedom from state institutions that cannot exploit them for their political interests.

In Europe, the attitude of society towards begging changed in the 17th century as a result of growing influence of secularism and weakening of religion that shattered beliefs on salvation and life after death. This changed the whole image of beggars. If somebody was found begging, his head was shaved and sometimes he was also beaten up as punishment. Some of the European cities expelled them from their boundaries. Some passed acts against begging; and some issued licenses to the deserving for begging. In the Industrial age, when work became compulsory for every able-bodied person, beggars became a burden on society. They were either imprisoned or confined to workhouses. The whole concept of charity had undergone a change and to give alms to a beggar meant to corrupt him. The concept was that instead of helping the poor, it was better to provide him with a job. Charity became secular and no longer remained religious.

In our society, religion continues to dominate begging. A beggar invokes religion to get alms and uses all such phrases that appeal to the religious sentiments of the people. Thus, the exploitation of religion continues in this region — beggars for charity and the rulers for

Society's Secret  
Problems  
News  
11/1/03

# A tangled web

Nariman Mukhtar

During a recent discussion regarding the characteristics looked for in partners or friends, we all came to the conclusion that trust was one of the most important factors. Without a measure of trust between a husband, wife, business partner or friend the whole relationship cannot prosper. In an intimate relationship like marriage, having perfect trust in your partner gives you peace of mind and the security you need to develop and grow together.

Likewise, good friends need to know that confidence exchanged will not be title-talked around the neighborhood in less time than it takes to say 'Enki'. Business partners need the security of believing their partner will not let them down either by underhanded dealings or sellings them out to a better offer, and partners in friendship and marriage need to know that the person in whom they have put their trust will not betray this and cause them heartbreak and unhappiness. Deciding to trust a person is largely instinctive, you either feel okay about someone, or you don't.

However, once that trust is broken it is often gone forever. Regaining ground in a relationship that has broken down because betrayal is a long and rocky road, one that sometimes can never be re-trodden.

Betrayal of marriage vows is probably one of the most common occurrences and is certainly not a new thing.

**Betrayal of marriage vows is probably one of the most common occurrences and is certainly not a new thing.**

'Promises are meant to be broken', is an old saying. Certain tabloids in the UK would go to the wall if it were not for the dalliances of the rich or famous or infamous as the case maybe. It's an ill wind, I can hear you say and certainly there is a lot of money to be made out of misery, the general public is insatiable for the salacious details of the affairs of prominent members of the society and the higher up the social tree, the better.

The percentage of marriages that suffer from having one, or sometimes both, partners straying, is much higher that you may think as this type of betrayal does not always lead to the marriage splitting up. On many occasions the strunt of the love ad commitment between two people can overcome one slip from grace, and they can't make a strong and lasting alliance. People stray for a myriad of reasons including feelings of neglect, being misunderstood, being caught in a weak moment, depression or just opportunism. But when they look back on the whys and wherefores and how it happened, the resulting upset caused is never worth it.

Bill Clinton may have found out the hard way that people will take an awful lot from a leader, but being deliberately lied to and misled can turn loyal supporter into a crowd baying for blood. This man had gone for the full hat trick (and the full Monty as I understand) of betrayal: family, friends and country. Most of us are fortunate enough that our peccadilloes are not broadcast quite so publicly, but the old adage; 'Be sure your sins will be found you out!' is as true today as when it was first coined.

Betrayal of trust leads to lying in order to cover your tracks, and useless you have a very good memory for what you've told and to whom, the whole of your fabricated structure will come crashing down around your ears leaving you exposed for deceiver you are.

As Sir Walter Scott wrote "Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive".