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# The Urban Poor: Who Are We?

by  
Viv Grigg

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What if the size of the Muslim world or of the Hindu population doubled every ten years? Suppose furthermore that these population blocs were found to be among the most responsive to the gospel on the earth? How would this affect our present strategies of Christian mission? Would we take up the challenge?

## **The Answer is a Dramatic “Yes!”**

Yet the number of urban squatters and slum dwellers in the world’s major cities constitutes a bloc as large as either the Muslims or the Hindus, it doubles in size every decade, and all indicators show it to be a responsive group. Logically, missions must swing their strategies to make these their priority target.

The majority of migrants to the mega-cities will move into the *slums* (Bangkok), *squatter areas* (Manila), *shanty towns* (South Africa), *bustees* (India), *bidonvilles* (Morocco), *favelas* (Brazil), *casbahs* (Algeria), *ranchitos* (Venezuela), *ciudades perdidas* (Mexico), and *barriadas* or *pueblos jovenes* (Peru). I will describe these in general with the term *squatter areas*.

These tend to be *slums of hope*. Their occupants have come in search of employment, have found some vacant land and gradually have become established. They are building their homes, finding work and developing some communal relationships similar to those of the *barrios* or villages from which they have come. In *slums of hope* social forces and expectations create a high degree of receptivity to the gospel.

Missions today must reach the last tribes and fulfill prior commitments to the rural poor. But new mission strategies must focus on the crucial point of spiritual warfare for the mega-cities. Within this broad objective, mission to the urban poor becomes a central target, as they are the ultimate victims of the oppression and evil of the mega-cities and nation states. They loom large in the heart of God. They are the key to the elite and the heart of the city. Among the most reachable of people groups today are migrants living in community, groups of peasants who have moved to cities and live in squatter areas.

Over the past 30 years, about one billion people have moved from rural areas to cities. In the next ten years, another one billion will board overladen buses and come to the cities. For most of them, the first

step is into squatter areas—centers of great darkness and demonic activity.

Between 1950 and 1980, urban growth in Third World mega-cities rose from 275 million to just under one billion. It is expected to double by the year 2000. Wherever land can be found, huts and plywood shacks will go up. Few governments have the capacity to prevent it or to serve the needs of the people arriving. Even the United States may not remain immune as its economy slows down.

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## **An understanding of the breadth of need and the range of potential responses enables us to reflect both on God’s responses and on strategic possibilities to implement as we walk with God.**

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Some of the most destitute of the poor live in mud homes on the streets of modern Dhaka city in Bangladesh, a new city that is now home to five million people, a city that will grow to contain 20 million people by the turn of the century. The 730,000 people in Dhaka’s 771 squatter areas will increase, until by the year 2000, they will make up the majority of the city’s population. Because of the lack of raw materials and other factors, there is little possibility for the city’s industrial growth to keep pace with the migration influx.

Almost all of the world’s population growth in the next decades will be in cities. Rural populations will tend to remain at present levels.

There is usually one mega-city per country. It drains resources from the entire country. Its bureaucracy locks up the potential for growth in the smaller cities. The next largest city as a rule is only ten percent the size of this mega-city. Chiang Mai, the second largest city of Thailand, for example, is thirty times smaller than Bangkok.

## **The Migrant Poor: Who Are We?**

One was a big man with a good education speaking English fluently with an English accent. The other was a Nepalese, small in stature but full of big dreams.

“What business would you get into if you were to make it off the street?” asked my friend, a Kiwi businessman.

“We would establish a tea stall,” they replied.

Several further discussions led to a conclusion that it was a worthy goal for \$100. But to find a piece of unoccupied street took ten days. They only had to

pay the police a reasonable two rupees each day for protection, but paying the local mafia cut their profit margin to zero.

A daughter fell sick from a fever. She had been caught in the rain without good blankets in the cold Calcutta winter. This crisis slowly consumed their financial capital.

Unable to pay the mafia, members of the family were beaten up.

### **City of Joy**

Calcutta, oh Calcutta! City where the powers of darkness have so gained control over the political and judicial leadership that only darkness prevails, and a mafia rules the city's people. Poverty and evil triumph and infest the lives of ordinary people until they go crazy with the pain.

Calcutta has more poverty and more grades of poverty than any other city in the world. I walk down the street, and a well-fed wraith-like figure, baby on hip, comes after me pleading, pleading. There are four of them fighting each day for this territory. An amputee shakes his cup on the corner, an old man lies on the path further along, near death.

In 1984, Geoffrey Moorehouse estimated that there were 400,000 men in town without a job.<sup>1</sup> The 1981 census put it at 851,806. Ganguly comments that perhaps no other city has one million educated youth registered with the employment exchanges.<sup>2</sup> There is beggary all over India, but nowhere is there beggary on the scale of Calcutta's.

Beyond the beggars are anywhere from 48,000 to 200,000 people who live permanently on the streets. One survey shows that two-thirds of them have some kind of regular employment, while 20 percent are beggars. Most have some kind of part-time work or have earned money by selling vegetables, paper, firewood and scraps.

More than half of the 3.5 million living within the metro core are slum dwellers. Two-thirds of Calcutta's families earn *350 rupees or less a month* (the poverty level is Rs600 or US\$50 per month for a family). Less than 20 percent of its workforce work in an organized industry. Agriculture and small crafts, not major or modern manufacturing, are the principal occupation of the people. In as much as 80 percent of its extended land surface of 1,350 square kilometers, there are 3.15 million *bustee* and slumdwellers.<sup>3</sup>

There is a level of poverty still lower than that experienced by beggar, street-dweller or bustee-dweller—the poverty of those who are approaching death. The dying are faces along the streets. An old man, his eyes fixed. Some passers-by leaving a few coins. A visit with the Brothers of Charity to the street-sleepers under an unfinished overpass. A

plaintive plea from a silver-haired mother shivering violently with fever for some coins to buy medicine. Behind her, two pot-bellied little boys displaying their first-degree malnutrition.

Calcutta daily demands that we face not just poverty, not alone inhumanity, but this gray face of approaching death. The burden is increased by the knowledge that the continued overfertility inherent in poverty will force five times this number of people off the land in the next generation (about 20 years). The fact is that there is no more land, no more subdivision of farms possible. Increased agricultural productivity will only add to the migration, for it will increase the number of living children without bettering the quality of rural life.

The constant bickering of Bengali politics is death for these poor, as is the economic dislocation introduced by a theoretically Marxist state government—in reality a continued domination by a rich ruling class. The perpetual bondage of Hindu caste and culture adds to the death.

### **Some Levels of Urban Poverty**

It would be a mistake to consider that the poor are to be found only in slums or squatter areas. Or that the people in the slums are necessarily all poor. Slums and poverty are not to be equated. And even among the poor there is a class structure or ranking. What then are the relationships between squatters and poverty?

### **Differences between First and Third World Urban Poor**

*Absolute poverty* is a term used to describe poverty when people have an absolute insufficiency to meet their basic needs—food, clothing, housing. Indeed, many who are in absolute poverty starve to death. Within this category there are many levels. For example, we may talk of first, second and third-degree malnutrition.

*Relative poverty* is found in the developed world and is measured by looking at a person's standard of living relative to others in the community or nation. It is sometimes called secondary poverty. It is a measure of the extent to which people are on the margins of society.

The measure of this relative or secondary poverty is often in terms not of a material or economic level, but of capacity to own and consume goods and services and to have opportunities for development. It is often an exclusion from opportunity and participation, a marginalization from society.

This marginal status is associated with and caused by (or causative of) a low material standard of living in relationship to present social perspectives

of how one should live well. To be without a car in a New Zealand city, for example, means one is poor and largely unable to participate in society. This is not true in Lima, Peru. An International Labor Organization study uses a measure of disposable income to establish the standard poverty line, dividing the total available income in the country by the population, thus determining this level relative to others within the nation.

Thus when talking of poverty in Third World squatter areas, we are generally talking of something that occurs at a level not even to be seen among the poor of a Western country. The middle class of Calcutta are poorer than the poor of Los Angeles.

The definition of poverty is also, to a large extent, a historically perceived issue. The poor of Manila are not as poor as the middle class of England even 400 years ago. But they are poor compared with the present-day middle class in any country in the world. Our definition of poverty has changed with the availability of technology that enables us to enjoy a healthier, happier life.

Poverty can also be defined in terms of what man and society could be, in terms of a future vision of a reasonable, or ideal, lifestyle. Biblical scholars have recently clustered their definitions around the theme of *shalom* in the Old Testament—peace that comes out of a just and secure society.

### Features of First and Third World Poverty

First World	Third World
Relatively few of society	Significant percentage of population
Objects of discrimination	Originates in lower and middle classes
Upward mobility difficult	Upward mobility from urban and rural roots
Job mobility limited	Flexible and adaptive labor
Hard to find permanent employment	Self-inflationary employment generation
“Secure” poverty/welfare	Daily subsistence search

### Reachable Communities of Urban Poor

The physical characteristics and culture of each squatter community differ from country to country. Yet the processes that generate them and the resultant evils are universal among the major cities of the Third World countries.

We may talk of three major international categories of urban poor—inner-city slums, squatters, and specialized groups.

*Inner-city slums* are decaying tenements and houses in what were once good middle and upper-class residences. They may be described as *slums of despair* where those who have lost the will to try and those who cannot cope gravitate. Yet here too are the recent immigrants, living near employment opportunities, and students in their hundreds of thousands, seeking the upward mobility of education.

In Sao Paulo, approximately half of the migrant poor that come to the city find their first residence in *favelas*, or shanty towns. The other half move to the *corticós* (run-down, inner-city housing), then within four years move down into the *favelas*. In Lima these are called *tugurios*.

In inner-city slums of despair there is little social cohesion, or positive hope to facilitate a responsiveness to the gospel. Since they are older poor areas of several generations of sin, they are not responsive, and hence do not constitute a high priority for church planting.

In terms of response it is more strategic to focus on *squatter areas*, which tend to be *slums of hope*. Here people have found a foothold into the city, some vacant land, jobs and some communal relationships similar to the *barrio* back home.

### The Task Ahead

Into this scene Jesus speaks the words, “And this is eternal life, to know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” (John 17:3). The confrontation of life with death involves aid, development, organization, politics. But as the brilliant Francis Xavier (a pioneer missionary to Asia) learned early in life, the issues of this world are not determined by politics and force, but by the mysteries of grace and faith. In the preaching of the cross comes the vanquisher of this slow dearth that grips the city. Eventually it must be movements of the righteous who can turn the flood tide. The question is how to generate movements of disciples among these poor and subsequently among the rich.

Defining poverty, its types, causes and potential responses, is an important step in the process of generating such movement. An understanding of the breadth of need and the range of potential responses enables us to reflect both on theology—that is, God’s responses—and on strategic possibilities to implement as we walk with God.

### End Notes

1. Moorehouse, Geoffrey, *Calcutta*, Penguin Books, 1984.
2. Ganguly, Tapash, “Pains of an Obese City,” *The Week*, Nov 17-23, 1985.

3. Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organization. *A Report on the Survey of 10,000 Pavement Dwellers in Calcutta: Under the Shadow of the Metropolis—they are citizens too*, Sudhendu Muukherjee, ed., 1973.