

Chennai's homeless form union, courtesy NGO

Chennai - A group of homeless people in this metropolis have joined hands, thanks to a non-governmental organisation (NGO), to fight for better living conditions, if not a roof over their heads.

Among the homeless is Roja, who with her family of seven lives on the dry banks of the Adyar river under a bridge in Saidapet neighbourhood where several hundreds have taken refuge.

There are an estimated 40,533 people in this metropolis who do not have a home. Action Aid India, an NGO, enumerated nearly 12,000 homeless households in [Chennai](#) in 2003.

They live on roadsides, under bridges and on embankments, going to work from homes without fixed addresses and returning only to sleep under the starry skies.

Counsellors from the Don Bosco Anbu Illam, which runs a home for street children here, say most such kids are from homeless families. If they ever went to a school, they soon drop out of it and begin working to supplement the family income.

Roja's 14-year old son Magesh, for example, gathers rubbish along the railway line and sniffs nail polish remover, petrol or whitener - whenever he can lay his hands on them.

Now, however, Roja and others like her can hope for a better future.

About 200 of the homeless have been brought together by Action Aid under the umbrella of a federation, the 'Engal (our) Chennai Pavement Dwellers Federation', so that they can join hands in pressing authorities for ration cards, voter identity cards and voting rights and also benefit from various government schemes.

'Most of the homeless people's children, as much as 73 percent of the children in the age group of 7-14, are school dropouts,' said Sundar B., Action Aid coordinator for the homeless.

'Some of these street dwellers are the most necessary elements of our society and contribute to our economy in their own way. But they are the most destitute, homeless, viewed always as encroachers,' he added.

'After working with them for three years, we have decided that the best way to help them is to unite them under an umbrella forum so that together, we can empower them.'

The NGO plans to help the forum to fight for shelter, women and child rights, access to welfare programmes and influence policymakers to address the needs of the homeless.

(© IANS / India eNews)