

# Mizoram's beggary ban: Reform or denial?

ABIGAIL CHINZAH

In late August, the Mizoram Assembly enacted the Prohibition of Beggary Act, which bans public begging while promising assistance and rehabilitation for those forced into it. The law establishes a relief board and receiving centres where people caught begging will be held briefly (up to a day) before being "rehabilitated" or returned to their home communities. Officials argue that the ban is necessary, as new rail links (like Sairang-Sihhmui) could attract more beggars from outside the state. Chief Minister Lalduhawma said the aim is to ensure dignity, not to criminalise poverty, adding that NGOs and church groups would partner with the government to provide training and support.

Opposition leader Lalchhandama Ralte of the Mizo National Front, along with several commentators, contended that a blanket ban conflicts with Mizoram's tradition of Christian compassion. They argue that prohibition alone is no solution and call instead for community-based charity. Critics note that rounding up beggars risks reviving a colonial-era approach, where people were confined for lack of work. If detention and deportation are the only measures, they warn, migrants and the destitute could be targeted simply for being poor.

India's history of anti-beggary laws shows why such concerns persist. Colonial-era acts such as the 1959 Bombay Beggary Act granted police sweeping powers to arrest "vagrants" and beggars, effectively criminalising homelessness. These laws often punished people for poverty: anyone without a job or home, risked being sent to jail or a "beggars' home." Over time, courts have questioned this approach. In 2018, for instance, the Delhi High Court struck down anti-beggary rules, observing that for the poorest, begging is often a last resort and punishing it is the "wrong approach."

The right to life and dignity implies a right to survive, and begging can be seen as a plea for help, implicating free speech and livelihood rights. Criminalising it raises constitutional concerns: it infringes upon the right to life and personal liberty under Article 21, which courts have interpreted to include the right to live with dignity. Begging, as soliciting alms, also falls within the ambit of free speech under Article 19(1)(a). Detaining individuals for begging restricts their freedom of movement [Article

19(1)(d)] and right to livelihood [Article 19(1)(g)], while doing so without charge violates personal liberty. Rights advocates therefore argue that punitive beggary laws punish necessity rather than crime.

The Mizoram government insists the law focuses on rehabilitation, not punishment, and points to programmes that have shown results. In Rajasthan, for example, "Project BHOR" provides vocational training to street beggars and helps with job placement. Reports suggest that dozens have secured formal jobs through this scheme. However, social policy researchers caution that vocational training alone rarely lifts people out of poverty.

A recent empirical study in Khulna City Corporation, Bangladesh, assessed the impact of a local beggar rehabilitation programme. Using a non-equivalent group design with instrumental variable regression, it sampled 385 individuals including 59 beneficiaries of the scheme and 326 non-beneficiaries. After months of training, participants' incomes, food security and well-being were no better than those who did not receive help. The study concluded that the programme was a "policy failure."

Such findings suggest that if Mizoram's scheme is to succeed, it must go beyond short courses with no follow-up. Certificates will not guarantee jobs, especially when local economies cannot absorb new workers. Real progress will require sustained investment in education, healthcare and jobs in poor communities, making it possible for people to leave street life behind. Without this, a relief centre risks becoming a mere holding pen.

Around high-profile events, officials have often "beautified" cities by removing the homeless from view, raising fears that Mizoram's ban may be more about appearances than solutions.

Political leaders in Mizoram insist this time will be different. They argue that new livelihood schemes and church-led charities will truly integrate the poorest, while supporters maintain that formal programmes are necessary because NGOs and voluntary efforts alone cannot solve the problem. They frame the ban as an attempt to build "long-term support systems" through livelihoods rather than policing.

Mizoram's ban will ultimately be judged by its human impact.

*(The writer is a PhD scholar at the Department of Political Science, St Joseph's University, Bengaluru)*