



## Organized begging in Punjab: Commerce, governance and social impact

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### Abstract

This research paper investigates the phenomenon of organized begging in India's Punjab, focusing on its intricate connections to commerce, governance, and social impact. While traditionally perceived as a symptom of poverty, begging in contemporary urban Punjab has transformed into a structured and exploitative system, orchestrated by "begging mafias" that manipulate vulnerable populations, including children and marginalized groups. The study emphasizes the significant rise of organized begging in urban centers, particularly near religious and tourist destinations, where cultural practices of almsgiving unintentionally perpetuate these exploitative networks. The inadequate legal frameworks and governance mechanisms in Punjab further exacerbate the issue, as existing laws fail to address the complex distinction between coerced and voluntary begging. This paper synthesizes interdisciplinary literature to conceptualize organized begging as a systemic issue rooted in socio-economic vulnerabilities, deficient legal protections, and cultural norms that valorize charity. It advocates for interdisciplinary approaches that integrate law enforcement, social welfare, and civil society efforts to dismantle these organized begging networks while providing rehabilitation and reintegration support for affected individuals. The findings highlight the urgent need for policy reforms and public awareness initiatives to address the ethical and humanitarian implications of organized begging in Punjab.

**Keywords:** Organized begging, Punjab, begging mafias, governance and exploitation

### Introduction

Begging in India has historically been viewed through the lenses of poverty, religious asceticism, and social marginalization. However, in recent years, it has transformed into a complex and organized activity, particularly in urban spaces, where it is often driven not by individual desperation but by well-structured networks that control, exploit, and profit from vulnerable populations. These networks, often referred to as "begging mafias," orchestrate the recruitment, mobility, and earnings of beggars—many of whom are children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and destitute women—through coercion, manipulation, and trafficking (Ghosh, 2014; Sharma, 2017; Singh, 2018) [12, 13, 14]. The phenomenon of organized begging represents not just a human rights concern but also a challenge to governance, public safety, and ethical social conduct.

In the state of Punjab—widely recognized for its agrarian prosperity and rising urbanization—the visibility of beggars, especially in cities like Amritsar, Ludhiana, Jalandhar, and Patiala, has increased noticeably. The convergence of religious tourism, rural-to-urban migration, and lack of effective governance mechanisms has created fertile ground for the expansion of organized begging practices (Kaur & Sidhu, 2020) [21, 22, 23]. These practices are especially prevalent near religious shrines, marketplaces, bus stands, and railway stations, where charitable giving is culturally encouraged. While public almsgiving may stem from empathy or religious virtue, it inadvertently sustains a system of exploitation, where beneficiaries are rarely the ones receiving actual support (Bhargava, 2015; Desai, 2019) [2, 8, 10]. Organized begging in Punjab, thus, is not only a moral or legal concern but also a form of underground commerce that operates with remarkable impunity, often

blurring the lines between criminality and informal livelihood.

The commodification of human suffering has become central to the logic of organized begging, where children are often deliberately maimed or drugged to invoke sympathy (UNODC, 2013; Jain, 2020) [20, 43]. This raises serious ethical and humanitarian questions, particularly as organized begging often overlaps with child labor, bonded labor, and human trafficking—issues that are already under-addressed in Indian policy frameworks (Sen, 2021) [35]. Punjab, while relatively more developed in terms of infrastructure, lacks a robust mechanism to identify, rescue, and rehabilitate individuals trapped in these exploitative systems. The failure to enforce child protection laws and anti-trafficking regulations, coupled with public indifference and bureaucratic inertia, allows such rackets to flourish (Chatterjee, 2019) [5].

Despite the existence of legal provisions such as the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act (1959), which some Indian states have adopted, Punjab currently lacks a clear and comprehensive anti-begging law tailored to its socio-political context. Even where laws exist, implementation remains weak due to inadequate monitoring, fragmented jurisdiction among government agencies, and a near-total absence of rehabilitation and reintegration frameworks (Kumar, 2021; Mishra & Thomas, 2016) [29]. Meanwhile, civil society and media investigations have occasionally exposed the inner workings of begging rackets, but these reports seldom translate into long-term policy responses or institutional accountability. Moreover, the judicial approach has often oscillated between criminalizing the act of begging and offering limited protection to beggars without addressing the structural forces driving the practice (Ali, 2018; NHRC, 2016). The failure to perceive begging as an

organized economic activity further limits the capacity of public institutions to respond effectively.

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to explore the phenomenon of organized begging in Punjab through a multi-dimensional lens that integrates commerce, governance, and social impact. By synthesizing literature from criminology, urban studies, sociology, and public policy, the study aims to conceptualize organized begging not as an isolated problem of poverty but as a structured and exploitative system. It examines how informal economies, weak governance, and cultural norms converge to allow such systems to thrive, and how public responses, including charitable giving, may unintentionally reinforce exploitative cycles. The study also seeks to illuminate the ethical, administrative, and legal implications of organized begging, and proposes a framework for more effective governance. Specifically, it calls for an interdisciplinary approach involving law enforcement, social welfare, child protection agencies, and civil society to develop long-term and humane solutions.

A review of existing literature reveals that while several studies have addressed poverty, homelessness, and informal economies in India, the specific issue of organized begging—particularly in the context of Punjab—has not been adequately examined (Sharma, 2017; Ghosh, 2014; Desai, 2019)<sup>[12, 13, 14]</sup>. Most academic work on begging tends to focus either on individual destitution or moral-religious interpretations, with little attention given to the systemic, commercialized, and criminalized aspects of the practice. Studies on urban informality (Roy, 2005)<sup>[34]</sup> and shadow economies (Portes & Haller, 2005)<sup>[33]</sup> have shown that many such practices function in parallel with formal economies, often with tacit state tolerance or neglect. However, few scholars have linked such insights to the operation of organized begging as a socio-economic enterprise. This lack of focused inquiry into the structures that enable organized begging, especially in regions like Punjab, constitutes a significant research gap. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to the existing discourse by offering a conceptual foundation for understanding organized begging as a problem of governance, social ethics, and underground commerce, thereby encouraging more policy-oriented and interdisciplinary investigations into the phenomenon.

## 1. Literature Review

### Expansion on Begging in India and Governance Challenges

Begging in India has historically been viewed through the lens of socio-economic deprivation, caste-based marginalization, and the lack of employment opportunities (Ghosh, 2014; Sharma, 2017). Scholars have traditionally associated begging with poverty and the absence of social safety nets, reflecting broader structural inequalities within Indian society. However, recent studies have shifted focus towards understanding the evolution of begging from an individual survival strategy to a more organized, exploitative practice, often controlled by criminal syndicates (Singh, 2018; Bhargava, 2015)<sup>[2]</sup>. These "begging mafias" coerce and manipulate vulnerable populations, including children and persons with disabilities, into forced begging, extracting their earnings and subjecting them to rigid routines and exploitation (Singh, 2018; Bhargava, 2015)<sup>[2]</sup>. The transformation of begging into a highly commercialized

and criminal enterprise has not been sufficiently addressed in existing literature, creating a significant research gap in understanding the dynamics of organized begging.

Organized begging, particularly in urban centers and religious pilgrimage sites, is a growing concern in India. Major cities like Amritsar and Ludhiana, which host large numbers of religious and tourist visitors, serve as prime locations for begging operations. These areas are culturally associated with almsgiving and charity, which creates fertile ground for exploiting the goodwill of pilgrims and tourists (Kaur & Sidhu, 2020; Desai, 2019)<sup>[6, 8]</sup>. Religious spaces such as gurdwaras and temples, combined with heavy foot traffic, allow begging syndicates to thrive. Beggars in these areas are often managed by intermediaries who enforce strict routines, extract earnings, and regulate the begging process, turning it into a business rather than a mere survival mechanism (Kumar, 2021)<sup>[26, 27, 28]</sup>. This commercialization of begging reflects a shift in the socio-economic landscape, where begging is no longer an isolated act but a well-organized, systemic activity with economic motivations (Desai, 2019)<sup>[9, 10]</sup>.

The governance of begging in India remains a significant challenge, as the legal framework for addressing this issue is both outdated and fragmented. The Bombay Prevention of Begging Act (1959) is still in effect in many states, criminalizing the act of begging without distinguishing between voluntary and coerced beggars, which often leads to the penalization of those who are themselves victims of exploitation (Sharma, 2017)<sup>[36, 37, 38]</sup>. The existing legal framework fails to address the complexities of organized begging, as it does not differentiate between those who beg out of choice and those who are coerced into it by criminal gangs (Desai, 2019). In Punjab, there is no state-specific legal mechanism that addresses the unique challenges posed by organized begging, which results in a gap in effective governance (Kumar, 2021)<sup>[26, 27, 28]</sup>. The absence of a comprehensive legal framework, combined with poor inter-agency coordination, limits the state's ability to tackle the root causes of organized begging and enforce existing laws effectively (Bhargava, 2015)<sup>[2]</sup>.

Recent developments, however, signal a shift towards a more proactive response to the issue of organized begging. In 2024, the Punjab government initiated a series of coordinated raids targeting exploitative child begging rings, resulting in the rescue of 261 children across 713 operations (Yes Punjab, 2024)<sup>[45, 46]</sup>. These efforts illustrate the government's growing awareness of the severity of organized begging and its impact on vulnerable populations, particularly children. In Ludhiana, for instance, 166 children were rescued from forced begging and child labor in early 2024, underlining the extent of the problem in urban areas (Hindustan Times, 2024)<sup>[17]</sup>. These rescue operations highlight the increasing focus on the criminal dimensions of begging and the need for a more nuanced approach to tackling the issue.

In response to the growing problem of organized begging, legal reforms have been proposed. The Punjab Home Department has recommended amendments to the Punjab Vagrancy Ordinance (1958), aiming to increase penalties for those involved in organized begging and to categorize it as a non-bailable offense when children or persons with disabilities are involved (Dawn, 2024)<sup>[74]</sup>. These amendments represent an attempt to strengthen the legal framework and improve enforcement mechanisms, with a

focus on dismantling the structures of begging syndicates. However, the success of these reforms depends on effective implementation and the capacity of local authorities to enforce new laws.

In addition to legal reforms, there has been a growing recognition of the need for a more humanitarian approach to addressing begging. One such initiative, "Project Jeevanjot," aims to reintegrate rescued children into society by providing them with shelter, education, and psychological counseling (Times of India, 2024) <sup>[41]</sup>. Nationally, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has called for the decriminalization of begging and the establishment of inclusive rehabilitation frameworks (NHRC, 2024). These efforts reflect a shift in policy, where the focus is not just on punitive measures but also on rehabilitation and reintegration, acknowledging the human rights of beggars and the need for a more compassionate response.

Despite these advancements, significant challenges persist. Cultural norms that valorize charity and almsgiving continue to perpetuate the cycle of begging, as they provide beggars with a perceived social legitimacy (Sharma, 2017). Furthermore, institutional weaknesses, including a lack of credible data on the scale of the problem and the invisibility of coerced beggars in official records, hinder the effectiveness of policy responses (Desai, 2019) <sup>[10]</sup>. Studies have also highlighted the difficulties in distinguishing between voluntary and coerced beggars, a challenge that complicates enforcement and the implementation of rehabilitation programs (Singh, 2018) <sup>[39, 40]</sup>. The lack of coordination between law enforcement, social welfare agencies, and non-governmental organizations further exacerbates the issue, as efforts to address begging are often fragmented and lack a cohesive strategy. The literature on begging in India has evolved from focusing on poverty and social exclusion to addressing the organized, criminalized dimensions of begging. The research indicates a clear need for more studies that explore the complex, systemic nature of organized begging, particularly in urban centers like Punjab. While recent policy developments, including legal reforms and humanitarian initiatives, reflect progress, significant gaps remain in addressing the governance challenges posed by organized begging. The evolving understanding of begging as an underground commercial enterprise requires a multifaceted approach that includes legal reform, enforcement, and rehabilitation to effectively tackle the issue.

### Research Gap

The research on begging in India, particularly organized begging, presents several gaps that need further exploration. While much of the existing literature addresses poverty-driven begging (Ghosh, 2014; Sharma, 2017), there is a lack of focus on the commercialization and criminalization of begging, especially within the context of Punjab. Studies rarely explore the organized networks that control begging, often exploiting vulnerable populations for profit. This oversight leaves a significant gap in understanding the criminal syndicates behind begging operations, which often involve coercion and trafficking. Additionally, the governance and legal framework for addressing begging remains fragmented, with limited research on the policy barriers that hinder effective action against organized begging and the rehabilitation of beggars. In Punjab, the absence of comprehensive anti-begging laws and weak

enforcement are critical issues that have not been sufficiently studied.

Moreover, cultural norms surrounding charity, especially near religious sites, have not been adequately explored. These cultural practices often legitimize begging, creating a favorable environment for organized begging networks to thrive. The intersection of begging with child labor and human trafficking also remains under-researched, despite evidence that children are often maimed or trafficked for the purpose of begging. Furthermore, while the individual impact of begging on beggars has been documented (Bhargava, 2015) <sup>[2]</sup>, little research exists on the broader social and economic consequences of organized begging, especially its impact on local communities and the economy.

Existing studies focus predominantly on punitive measures, neglecting the rehabilitation and reintegration of beggars into society. This gap points to the need for research on the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs and social welfare initiatives aimed at combating organized begging. Additionally, the relationship between organized begging and informal economies remains underexplored. Research on shadow markets has shed light on other informal practices, yet little has been done to study organized begging as part of these shadow economies, particularly in urban centers like Amritsar, Jalandhar, and Ludhiana. These gaps highlight the need for more interdisciplinary research that integrates criminology, sociology, urban studies, and public policy to better understand the dynamics of organized begging as a systematic and exploitative activity.

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study on organized begging in Punjab draws upon multiple sociological and criminological theories to understand the underlying causes and dynamics of the issue. Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969) <sup>[18]</sup> suggests that individuals are more likely to engage in deviant behavior, such as being part of organized begging networks, when their social bonds—such as those with family, school, and community—are weak. The breakdown of these bonds can lead to increased vulnerability and exploitation. Structural Functionalism (Durkheim, 1893) <sup>[11]</sup> offers an understanding of how societal dysfunctions, such as poverty and inequality, contribute to the emergence of begging as a social phenomenon. Begging, while harmful, reflects broader societal issues related to the failure of institutions to adequately address inequality and poverty. Routine Activities Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) <sup>[6]</sup> posits that organized begging occurs when motivated offenders (begging syndicates), suitable targets (vulnerable individuals), and a lack of capable guardianship (weak law enforcement) converge. This theory highlights the environmental conditions that enable the proliferation of organized begging. Lastly, Human Trafficking Theory (Goodey, 2008) <sup>[15]</sup> is critical in understanding how traffickers exploit individuals for forced begging. This theoretical lens helps identify how coercion, exploitation, and human trafficking networks are key components of organized begging in Punjab.

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study revolves around key constructs that help explain organized begging as a

social problem. The concept of social vulnerability refers to individuals or groups who face factors such as poverty, illiteracy, and a lack of social support, which increase their susceptibility to being exploited by criminal networks involved in organized begging. The exploitation of vulnerable individuals is central to this framework, highlighting how criminal syndicates force people into begging through coercion, manipulation, and abuse. The policy and legal framework is another critical aspect, as the study examines the role of inadequate legal enforcement and the failure of rehabilitation programs in allowing organized begging to persist. The rehabilitation and reintegration concept focus on the current shortcomings of policies designed to help individuals involved in begging. The framework suggests that successful intervention should not only criminalize begging but also offer comprehensive rehabilitation and social support to help victims reintegrate into society and escape exploitation. By addressing these key constructs, the conceptual framework provides a comprehensive view of organized begging, emphasizing the need for systemic reforms to tackle both the legal and social dimensions of the issue.

### Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the evolving nature of begging in Punjab, particularly the rise of organized begging networks that exploit vulnerable populations. These networks, often managed by criminal syndicates, not only perpetuate the cycle of poverty but also intensify the exploitation of marginalized groups, including children, elderly individuals, and persons with disabilities. The study reveals that the commercialized nature of begging in urban areas, especially near religious and tourist destinations, is a growing challenge for the state's governance and law enforcement systems. Similar patterns of organized begging have been observed in other regions, where the exploitation of vulnerable populations is systematically perpetuated by organized crime syndicates (Koehler *et al.*, 2019; Krieger & Pozzoni, 2018)<sup>[24, 25]</sup>. These criminal groups control begging routes, ensuring a constant flow of money through coercion and manipulation of beggars.

One of the key observations is the tension between the social acceptance of charity and the exploitation of that generosity by organized crime syndicates. While charity has always been a culturally ingrained practice in Punjab, it inadvertently fuels organized begging by creating a constant flow of resources that can be exploited. Previous studies indicate that begging, especially in areas where religious tourism and philanthropy intersect, often evolves into a business enterprise where criminal actors profit by siphoning off the alms meant for the impoverished (Nelson & Hardwick, 2017)<sup>[32]</sup>. The duality of charity—acting as both a social good and a means of exploitation—has been discussed in literature as one of the main contributors to the perpetuation of organized begging (Houghton & Prothero, 2015)<sup>[19]</sup>.

Additionally, the governance failures highlighted in the study indicate that the legal framework, though in place, remains insufficiently equipped to deal with the complexities of organized begging. Law enforcement agencies are often ill-prepared to differentiate between voluntary beggars and those coerced into begging by criminal organizations. This discrepancy further exacerbates the vulnerability of victims, leaving them trapped in a cycle

of exploitation with little recourse. Research by Velasco *et al.* (2018)<sup>[44]</sup> suggests that law enforcement's reliance on traditional criminal justice measures, which primarily target street-level beggars rather than the criminal syndicates behind the scenes, is ineffective. Furthermore, inadequate training and a lack of sensitivity towards the socio-economic drivers of begging may lead to the criminalization of beggars rather than providing them with the support they need to escape exploitation.

The study also emphasizes the role of social welfare systems, or the lack thereof, in addressing the root causes of begging. Punjab's existing welfare infrastructure is fragmented, with insufficient coordination between various state departments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and social service providers. This gap creates an environment where beggars are either criminalized or neglected, without adequate support for rehabilitation and reintegration into society. As argued by Götz & Peeters (2016)<sup>[16]</sup>, effective social welfare systems must integrate both preventive and rehabilitative services to address the root causes of begging, such as poverty, lack of education, and disability, while simultaneously offering rehabilitation services for those already involved in begging.

### Implications

The implications of this study are significant for both policy and practice. First, there is a pressing need for a redefined approach to begging that distinguishes between voluntary and coerced begging. This requires an overhaul of the current legal framework to create more specific laws that address organized begging networks and the exploitation of vulnerable individuals. Policymakers must develop and implement strategies that target the dismantling of these criminal networks rather than solely focusing on punishing the victims of exploitation.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of integrated governance that brings together law enforcement, social welfare agencies, and civil society organizations. There is an urgent need for multi-stakeholder collaboration to address the issue comprehensively. Local governments, along with NGOs, must work together to provide rehabilitation services, social reintegration programs, and educational opportunities for those rescued from begging rings. By focusing on preventive measures, such as improving access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, the root causes of begging can be addressed more effectively.

Moreover, there is a need for public awareness campaigns that challenge the social norms surrounding charity. By educating the public about the realities of organized begging and the exploitation involved, it may be possible to shift societal attitudes and reduce the demand for alms that sustains begging mafias.

### Conclusion

Organized begging in Punjab presents a complex socio-economic challenge that intersects with issues of poverty, crime, governance, and social norms. This study has illustrated that organized begging is not just an isolated problem but a systemic issue driven by criminal exploitation and cultural practices that sustain it. While legal and policy measures exist, they remain inadequate in addressing the modern, organized nature of begging. To combat this issue effectively, Punjab must adopt a more comprehensive

approach that combines legal reform, social welfare initiatives, and public education.

The study also emphasizes the need for a shift in governance practices, calling for better coordination between law enforcement agencies, social service providers, and NGOs. Only through collaborative efforts can the state begin to dismantle the networks that profit from human suffering and provide meaningful support to the victims of this exploitation. In conclusion, while organized begging remains a persistent issue in Punjab, concerted action at multiple levels policy, governance, and public awareness can pave the way for more sustainable solutions.

### Future Research

Future research on organized begging in Punjab should explore the broader socio-economic factors that contribute to the rise of begging mafias. Specifically, studies could examine the role of urbanization, migration patterns, and economic inequalities in exacerbating the problem. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how organized begging evolves over time and the effectiveness of legal and welfare interventions in mitigating its impact.

Moreover, future studies could focus on the specific dynamics of begging mafias, looking at the structure of these criminal networks, the strategies they use to recruit and control beggars, and the socio-political contexts in which they thrive. A closer examination of the intersections between child trafficking, bonded labor, and begging could yield important insights into the overlapping nature of these exploitative practices.

Another promising avenue for research is the exploration of alternative models of social welfare and rehabilitation for beggars. How can states, NGOs, and communities work together to provide sustainable livelihoods for those at risk of being coerced into begging? Research into successful models of social reintegration from other regions could offer valuable lessons for Punjab and other states facing similar challenges.

Finally, public perception plays a critical role in perpetuating or alleviating the problem of organized begging. Future research should investigate how public attitudes toward charity, poverty, and begging influence the actions of both the general public and policymakers. Understanding how cultural values shape the dynamics of begging could provide essential insights for designing more effective public awareness campaigns and social interventions.

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