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Thoughts on the Beggars in Bodh Gaya, India with 52 high-resolution pictures.

by Tom Riddle, 2007.



The main stupa in Bodh Gaya marks the spot where the Buddha attained his full awakening. No begging is allowed inside the park that contains the stupa. The beggars work just outside the park.



Lots of people, like this rickshaw driver and his wife, are poor, but getting by. No one I met was camera shy.



Most young boys, like these guys, work. A few also go to school.

In late 2007 I had a chance to spend two weeks in Bodh, Gaya. While I was there, an old friend asked me to take pictures of the beggars for his charity work. While taking the pictures I learned a few things.

First of all, there isn't a single professional beggar in the village of Bodh Gaya.

One afternoon this snake charmer came into town but he only stayed a few hours--he's the only person who came close to having professional status.

You can't be a professional beggar in Bodh Gaya because it's a seasonal job. Tourists only come to Bodh Gaya four months out of the year – from November, through February. By mid-March it's so hot that almost no foreigners can stand it.



So who is going to cut off the arms and legs of a little baby to create a pathetic beggar if that little beggar can only work four months out of the year? At certain Hindu holy sites you'll see people who have been deliberately maimed so that they'll be better beggars as well as saddhus or holy men who make their living from alms. But there is no one like that in Bodh Gaya.

So if all of the beggars in Bodh Gaya are amateurs, who are they? Most of them come from the surrounding villages.

The majority of the beggars are old women. The old women are there because they are too old to work in the fields and because they have no family support. Naturally then anything anyone gives them helps keep them alive.

There are, however, a few old women whose families have sent them there so that Granny can earn some money to supplement the household income.



There are a few old men who beg as well—they are simply too old to work. Additionally there are a few blind people and cripples. There are simply no social services available to help these people.



I only saw one crippled female and that was this young girl. She is holding a loaf of bread that a pilgrim has just given her.



Indeed pilgrims are occasionally quite generous to the beggars of Bodh Gaya. At least one temple occasionally offers the beggars free food.



There is one beggar in Bodh Gaya who pulls in more money than anyone else and that is this gentleman. This guy has nerves of steel to sit where he does on the pavement hoping that no speeding car, motorcycle, or truck hits him. He told me that he pulls in a few hundred rupees every day. When I got to know him socially I found that he was really not



any different than anybody else. He was aware of both his crippled body and his handsome face. Like almost every Indian I've met, his self-image was excellent and if anybody bothered him, the guy really could pack a punch.



There are no working age men working as beggars in Bodh Gaya. You do see a few working age women begging but they are single mothers. These ladies told me that their husband either died or ran away. By "ran away" they could mean that he, like a growing number of men in India, drinks too much.



Besides the old ladies, the largest single group of beggars are the young girls. These girls range from about four to 11 or so. They girls are there because their families have no other way of earning money, that is they are totally destitute, or because the families believe that the girls can earn more money begging on the streets and they can by helping the family around the house. For these families education is not a high priority.



There are also a few children who skip school to beg.

If education is a priority for the poorer, but not totally destitute families, they can send their children to one of the free schools run by charitable institutions. For the last five years I've helped out at this school, the Pragma Vihar school. This school was started by Western Buddhist meditators who wanted to give something back to the community. It is totally tuition-free and although the school has some students from better off families who are there to give an example to the children from poor, illiterate families, the school tries to teach the poorest of the poor. It is administered by a Catholic charity but there is absolutely no proselytizing. If there was, the Muslim parents would pull their children out the next day. There is however a silent universal prayer every morning and a nondenominational meditation.



If you're interested in helping the school please visit this web site.

You may wonder what do these girls do after they stop begging. The only story I heard had a more or less happy ending. As soon as the girls begin to



enter puberty the families feel that it is no longer proper for them to work outside the home. At that time the girls go to their villages and work in the home until they are about 15 years old, at which time they are married.

That's the happy ending. The unhappy ending, that no one would tell me, was that India is filled with brothels whose prostitutes come from poor places and poor families.

With the old ladies it is often hard to know who really needs money and who is supplementing the household income. With the children though, it's easy to know who to give to: no one!

Every rupee given to beggar children is one more reason for them, or children already in school, not to go to school. Giving to beggar children doesn't solve anyone's problems even though it can be, well, fun.

All of the poor people, including the beggars, I met in Bodh Gaya were just that, poor. Although there are drug dealers and alcoholics in Bodh Gaya, none of them, as far as I could tell are beggars. All the beggars I met were nice people and, the children at least were as happy or happier as children I've met in the West. Their "people skills" far exceed anything I've seen in Western children. For some reason we have more money than they do and we should try to help them, but they can teach us a few things as well.



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