

Begging for answers: Film review of “Beggars of Lahore”

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LSE Visiting Fellow Dr Sheba Saeed recently screened her film “Beggars of Lahore” on the campus. **Marielle Velander** writes that the documentary makes a powerful statement about the complex factors underpinning the problem of begging but leaves viewers feeling the issue is too big to chew—let alone digest.



“Even if we are begging, it’s not as if we are stealing or looting” says a shirtless man squatting on a busy street corner, in the opening scene of the provocative 45-minute documentary “Beggars of Lahore”. The focus then abruptly switches to an interview with a man with two stumps for legs, sitting helplessly on the street, contemplating suicide. The film then merges into a sobering set of images of beggars with bulbous facial tumours, full body burns, and reduced limbs, seen through a car window. We are about to follow LSE Visiting Fellow Dr. Sheba Saeed into the backstreets of Lahore, and two things are certain — it won’t be pretty and it won’t be easy.

This documentary, made by Dr. Saeed as an audio-visual dissertation for her MPhil in History, Film and Television at the University of Birmingham, asks many difficult and ambitious questions. Why do people beg? What roles do religion and the state play in encouraging or discouraging begging? Why is begging on the rise in the city of Lahore? The visual answer she provides is haunting and open-ended, leaving us with the feeling that there is a compulsion to look deeper into the reasons behind begging in order to find solutions to this globally pertinent problem.

Dr. Saeed, who grew up in the UK, was struck by the prevalence of begging in Pakistan’s second largest city when she visited for a family wedding in 2004, the first time she had been since childhood. The documentary, dedicated to her late father who grew up in this historical city, was filmed over the course of two research trips in 2005 amounting to a total of 8 weeks of fieldwork and 40 hours of footage. Together with her two male cousins and sister — prerequisites for being a female videographer in Pakistan — she gained unique insight into the begging situation in Lahore.

Lahore is a bustling city of 9 million inhabitants that has [nearly doubled in size](#) in the past decade. It is a diverse society that has resulted in a miscellany of reasons for why people would turn to begging. The documentary blends the haunting images of various beggars, made all the more powerful by the chilling original soundtrack, with the silent presentation of formidable questions or themes. The dialogue is dominated by interviews with beggars, and expert opinions from the likes of cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan and renowned human rights activist Hina Jilani, with Dr. Saeed only providing a voice over for an introduction to Lahore. In not reconciling the contradictions between these views, Dr. Saeed presents a documentary that is as confusing, intricate, and disorganised as the social problem it portrays.

One of the first aspects of begging that Dr. Saeed tackles is the idea of begging as a profession. What makes begging a more attractive profession than its alternatives? The documentary critically addresses religion in this respect, pointing out that although Pakistan has politically banned begging, alms giving, known as *zakat*, is an important part of the Muslim religion. The state has actually set up a [Zakat Fund](#), to which ‘deserved beggars’ can apply. Imran Khan went as far as to say, “Beggars have it good here.” The requirement of literacy in order to apply to the zakat fund, and the ambiguity of the term ‘deserved beggar’, however, may work against the interests of the beggars. “The Zakat is mishandled, it should be focused on social issues,” says Hina Jilani. Other possible reasons for begging that are brought up include the increase in rural-to-urban migration, the lack of social security, and drug addiction.

The section on drug addiction was stylistically one of the most powerful segments of the film, blending black-and-

white footage of the hopeless and dazed faces of drug addicts with simplistic organ music that moved shivers down my spine. Towards the end of the segment, the footage gained full colour, a stylistic statement to the reality—and gravity—of the situation for these people. It begged the question: why aren't there more rehabilitation options for drug addicts?

Towards the end of the film, Dr. Saeed moves to explore the solutions proposed, rather than the root causes for begging. The juxtaposition of images of actual beggars with the interviews with local affluent youth and supposed experts allows the audience to come to their own realisation that there is no single easy solution for this colossal problem of heterogeneous origins. The one source of optimism, perhaps, is the success of Pakistan's Child Protection Welfare Bureau (CPWB), established in 2005 to rescue and rehabilitate street children. That case alone could be a compelling source for a documentary, as is exemplified by the singular focus on the Edhi Foundation's work with street children in Karachi in the 2013 documentary "[These Birds Walk](#)".

In this sense, the documentary could have benefited from greater depth into one or two of the proposed reasons and solutions for begging. Instead, "Beggars of Lahore" left me feeling that begging was an issue too big for me to chew—let alone digest. Although it certainly highlighted the importance of investigating this issue further, I also felt overwhelmed by the multitude of various interpretations of and approaches to the problem present in one single city.

In conclusion, "Beggars of Lahore" makes a powerful statement about the complex factors undergirding the ancient and omnipresent problem of begging. However, this message could have been strengthened by a more focused approach, reflected both in a more organised style and more selective content. The film ultimately leaves the viewer with a renewed appreciation for the size and complexity of the social problem of begging, which is worthy of critical analysis in any corner of the world in which it appears.

Read Dr Sheba Saeed's *India at LSE* post about the making of *Beggars of Lahore* [here](#).

About the Author

Marielle Velander is an LSE Masters candidate in Anthropology and Development with a specific interest in water issues in South Asia. Before starting at LSE she spent the summer in Lucknow studying Urdu intensively as a recipient of the U.S. State Department Critical Language Scholarship. She tweets [@mariellewel](#).



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