

ABSOLUTE SQUALOR!!!!

"We were frozen with shock, amazed at how Ram family has managed to survive all along, at the same time shocked by years of neglect and the lack of response by our community to bring relief to a family desperate for a decent life."

The lean-to structure constructed of used roofing iron has one room with only one bed and a mosquito net. There is not one piece of good, solid furniture in the entire room. Everything is broken, tattered and torn, finger-thick dust everywhere and everything in the greatest disorder. When you enter the room, your sight is dimmed by the darkness of the rusting iron walls blackened by years of wood-fire cooking.

In a corner of the room is a little fire place made of two concrete blocks. When the family prepare meals, the room is filled with smoke. You grope around at first as if you were in a cave, until your eyes get used to the dull environment, as in a fog, you gradually notice a few objects. Everything is dirty, everything is covered with dust; it is dangerous to even sit down.

Living there were a mother and father with four children. Yet somehow this cramped, tattered shack did not noticeably hinder the family's will to survive. One can easily see why the couple share one bed, cook on an open fire, eat their meals and endure the rats and roaches that appear from time to time. In a corner lies a tattered kerosene lamp, pile of clothes packed in cartons. As disturbing as it sounds, there is stench of urine and animal feces around the yard and visible rat droppings inside the room with water seeping from underneath the slats of timber on the mud floor. There is not a single clean spot on the floor nor a dry spot in the house when it rains.



Ten years of neglect in a community of squatters



Mr Ram Deo outside their home in Manoca

Mr. Ram has visual impairment, physically weak, severely malnourished children and tormented by a lifetime of inadequacy, mainly because of living conditions, displacement and the lack of community response to his family needs. There is an unspoken sense of helplessness around this family. Protruding rib cages and depressed stomachs of the four children expose the hardship and years of malnourishment. Legs as frail and thin as match sticks show the plight of the family.

"Life is worth living only if we get a chance" Ram Deo

"We went many places asking for help but we are too poor to pay the small amount required for housing. We do not even meet the requirements for housing. Where do we go? We're not against leaving this place, but we cannot find anywhere to go. People tell us to find a better place, build a better house but what can I do? What I earn everyday on the streets selling beans and peanuts is the meal I provide for my family. Sometimes I do not earn much in a day so my children go to school without lunch. No one wants to listen to me." Ram Deo.



Outside the shack--which the Ram family have spruced up with the possessions they were able to bring when they first moved in is disintegrating, emitting a putrid smell. The situation gets worse, the bathroom – located some 15 meters from the shack is filthy, without doors and overgrown with weed all around. It was the most shocking sight we have ever seen.

'I mostly study as soon as I come home from school. Sometimes we do not have kerosene for the lamp so I cannot study at night. I want to pass all my exams. I am in form four now. I work hard and last year I came 6th in my class', Archana Ram.

Living room, kitchen, bedroom – all in one

"We found it unfit for human habitation. It was disgusting. No human being should be subjected to such living conditions. As a community, we have a responsibility to our people. We can surely mobilise resources to at least make life comfortable for this family," says Ratnesh Bhawan, Advisory Counsellor and a volunteer.

The family once lived in an extended family home not far from where they currently reside. Having displaced from the family land five years ago, the Ram family erected a shelter on state land. Depending on the monthly welfare allowance and sale of confectionery, the family just manages to survive. There is no surplus income for anything else.



"What more can I build. This is all I can offer my family," Ram Deo

Gold gives beauty to even ugliness: but with poverty everything becomes frightful!

Dear Reader,

I plead with you to help build a home for this family, even if it means building a one-roomed structure with proper washroom facilities where they currently reside. We will mobilise our trusted volunteers to build a structure as our immediate priority.

It is our collective responsibility to offer this family a life worth living. Your contribution this year has helped equip the Ram children with school provisions and payment of school levies. Besides living under such conditions, having a child with a mental condition is more than a challenge for the parents. Children are now sponsored by Samaaj Sewa Fiji -USA.

My major problem with the world is the problem of scarcity in the midst of plenty and we have grown literally afraid of the poor. We despise the poorest in our community and we often fail to make an effort to save their inner life, making them spiritless. This is not the life we want to offer these children and future generations. Let us give them hope.

M.Irshad Ali
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