

Harsh Mander

Harsh Mander, human rights and peace worker, writer, columnist, researcher and teacher, works with survivors of mass violence, hunger, homeless persons and street children.

Books and Writings

An overview of his writings and talks are available on <http://harshmander.in/>

His over 25 books include:

- 'Partitions of the Heart: Unmaking the Idea of India', Published by Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2019.
- 'Looking Away: Inequality, Prejudice and Indifference in New India', published by Speaking Tiger, 2015.
- 'Locking Down the Poor: The Pandemic and India's Moral Centre', Published by Speaking Tiger, 2020
- 'Between Memory and Forgetting: Massacre and the Modi Years in Gujarat', published by Yoda Press, New Delhi, 2019.
- 'Reconciliation: Karwan e Mohabbat's Journey of Solidarity Through a Wounded India' (co-authored), published by Westland Publications, Chennai, 2018.
- 'Fatal Accidents of Birth: Stories of Suffering, Oppression and Resistance', published by Speaking Tiger, 2016.
- 'Ash in the Belly: India's Unfinished Battle against Hunger', published by Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2013.
- 'Invisible People: Stories of Courage and Hope', published by Duckbill Books, New Delhi, 2016
- 'Unheard Voices: Stories of Forgotten Lives', published by Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2001.
- 'Fear and Forgiveness: The Aftermath of Massacre', published by Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2009.
- 'Untouchability in Rural India' (co-authored), published by Sage Publications India, New Delhi, 2006
- 'Fractured Freedom: Chronicles from India's Margins', published by Three Essays Collective, 2012.

His real-life stories have been adapted for films, such as Shyam Benegal's Samar, and for Mallika Sarabhai's dance drama Unsuni.

Research and Teaching

He is a PhD from Vrije University in Amsterdam. His thesis was titled Vulnerable People and Policy Development in India: Designing State Interventions for Hunger, Homelessness, Destitution and Targeted Violence.

He is the Chairperson, Centre for Equity Studies, devoted to the analysis and development of public policy and law for justice and rights of disadvantaged groups.

He founded, convenes and edits the annual India Exclusion Report. Five reports have been published, and the next two reports are under way. These attempt to document the experience of disadvantaged people of the state; and on evidence-based analysis and advocacy for more just and equitable laws and policies. <http://indiaexclusionreport.in/>

He regularly writes columns for Scroll, the Indian Express, The Hindu and the Wire, and wrote a fortnightly column for more than 12 years for the Hindu and the Hindustan Times; he also contributes frequently to scholarly journals.

He teaches courses on poverty and governance in the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad; and the India Leaders for Social Sector, among others. Past teaching assignments include the LBS National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie; the Open Society Internship for Rights and Governance in the European University; the Nelson Mandela Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi; St Stephen's College, Delhi, the Centre for Law and Governance, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi; and NALSAR (National Academy for Law) Hyderabad. He writes and speaks regularly on issues of social justice.

He delivered the inaugural Centre of South Asian Studies Lecture on South Asian Public Affairs of Cambridge University. He has also lectured at the California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco; the Institute for Development Studies, University of Sussex, UK; ISS in the Hague; MIT, Boston, UCLA, Universities of Stanford, Washington (Stanford), Austin, and several others.

He is from September 2021 to August 2022 the Richard von Weizsacker Fellow of the Robert Bosch Academy, Berlin, Germany.

Public Policy Engagement for Justice and Equity

As Member of the Prime Minister's National Advisory Council from June 2010-12, he convened the working groups on the Food Security Bill, Urban Poverty and Homelessness, Disability Rights, Bonded Labour, Street Vendors and Urban Slums, Land Acquisition and Rehabilitation Bill, Child Labour Abolition, Manual Scavenging Abolition, and co-convened the groups on the Communal and Targeted Violence Bill, Dalits and Minorities, Tribal Rights, among others.

He was Special Commissioner to the Supreme Court of India in the Right to Food case for twelve years from 2005-17. In these 12 years, he investigated for the Supreme Court starvation deaths, and reviewed implementation and directed public policy reform for advancing the right to food and nutrition in several states in India.

He worked formerly in the Indian Administrative Service in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh for almost two decades. He took voluntary retirement from the civil services in 2002 in protest against the role of the state in the communal massacre in Gujarat, which he believed to be state-sponsored.

He was Chairperson of the committee of the Government of India on ways to make the Urban Health Mission to make it work for urban poor people. He was also on various national official National Committees such as on Social Protection and both the Saxena Committee for Rural BPL and Hashim Committee for Urban BPL. He was a Member of the Core Groups on Bonded Labour and Mental Hospitals of the statutory National Human Rights Commission. He was founder Chairperson of the State Health Resource Centre, Chhattisgarh, which established the Mitandin Community Health Programme, which was the fore-runner of the national Asha Programme for country-wide community health workers.

Judicial Interventions

He has made many significant interventions in India's highest courts. For instance,

- his petition to decriminalize beggary was allowed, which ended begging as a crime after nearly a hundred years

- his petition in the Supreme Court resulted in the reopening for investigation of over 2000 criminal cases related to the Gujarat carnage of 2002 which had been closed without trial.
- a series of his interventions in the Supreme Court as Commissioner led to orders making homeless shelters a legal duty for all state governments.
- he petitioned against the detention of undocumented people deemed to be ‘foreigners’ in jails in inhuman conditions in Assam for nearly a decade;
- he petitioned for legal action against perpetrators of hate speech resulting in sectarian violence in Delhi 2020
- he petitioned for food and livelihood security of migrants during the covid pandemic
- he petitioned for humane treatment of persons with mental illness in mental hospitals.

Civil Society Interventions

- He is a founding member of the National Campaign for the People’s Right to Information.
- He is also a founding member of ANHAD (Act Now for Harmony and Democracy).
- He is also a Member of the Ara Pacis Initiative in Rome aimed to launch an active reflection on forgiveness as a moral, spiritual and political tool for achieving reconciliation among peoples.
- From October, 1999 to March 2004, worked as Country Director, ActionAid India, a development support organization.
- He is Patron of the Sanjivini Society for Mental Health, New Delhi
- He was Chairperson of INCENSE (The Inclusion and Empowerment of People with Severe Mental Disorders).
- He is associated with social causes and movements, such for communal harmony and justice, homeless people and bonded labour tribal, Dalit, child and disability rights.
- He worked for four years as Country Director of Action Aid India, from 1999-2004.
- He was the Chairperson of the Advisory Board of the Human Rights Initiative of the Open Society Foundations from 2020-22, and Member from 2018-20.

Interventions for Street Children, Homeless Persons and Leprosy Patients

He founded a campaign to work with homeless persons and street children through which around 5000 homeless street girls and boys, by providing them safe spaces are being provided safe spaces as residential hostels in mostly running government schools in 10 cities. (These are now managed by the Rainbow Foundation India).

In Delhi, Patna, Hyderabad and Jaipur, he founded and heads an initiative which helps run extensive street medicine programs to reach homeless women, men and children on the streets with health-care services, with health teams on foot and in vans at night.

He has also conceptualised and helped open recovery shelters for homeless men and women with TB, orthopaedic ailments, mental health problems and reproductive health challenges, recognizing that cure on the streets for homeless persons is impossible.

He founded Ashagram, or Village of Hope, in Barwani, Madhya Pradesh, for lives of dignity for persons with leprosy, with facilities for dignified livelihoods, surgery and rehabilitation, and education for children. This extended later to include polio surgery and community care of persons with mental illness.

Interventions with survivors of targeted religious violence

He is the founder of Aman Biradari, a people's campaign for a secular, peaceful, just and humane world, established after the Gujarat communal carnage of 2002. Aman Biradari works closely with other people's organizations and groups for the defence of secularism; for public compassion; and for promoting the values of the constitution.

From the autumn of 2017, he established and led the important national initiative which he called the Karwan e Mohabbat, or Caravan of Love, to try to counter rising hate and fear in the country, but not with hate; instead with love and solidarity. The Karwan, a wide-based, collaborative civil society initiative of independent individuals, people's organisations and social movements, visits in their homes the families of those who lost loved ones to hate violence and lynching. It undertakes these journeys for atonement, solidarity, healing, conscience and justice with people who were targets of hate attacks across India.

The Karwan e Mohabbat also geared itself for a massive relief effort during the pandemic lockdowns. The team members organised 10 million meals across the country; they also ran helplines for migrants, organised buses for them to return to their villages, as well as for homeless people (with Medicine Sans Frontiers and other organisations) covid detection camps, and isolation and treatment centres.

Awards

The Peace Research Institute Oslo has included him in its 2022 shortlist of people recommended for the Nobel Peace Prize

Among his awards are the FAU (Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg) Human Rights Award 2022, the Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar Gold Plaque 2020, the Quaide Milleth Award 2020, the Ida Scudder Memorial Oration of Christian Medical College, Vellore 2019, the South Asian Minority Lawyers Harmony Award 2012, the Chisthi Harmony Award 2012, the Rajiv Gandhi National Sadbhavana Award for peace work, and the M.A. Thomas National Human Rights Award 2002.