

Chapter VI

CONCLUSION

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This chapter describes the main findings of the study and offers some recommendations including the kind of interventions that required to deal with the problem of street children in Howrah.

The condition of the street children has been discussed mainly with reference to their social relationships, reason of leaving their native places, family background and support, the siblings, literacy and access to education, economic activities, abuse encountered, place of stay and other support systems, exposure to delinquency and abuse, health and nutrition and living condition.

In the present study the socio-economic background of the street children and their relations with the natal family, the underlying causes of turning them as street children, the work and activities of the street children and their place in the informal economic sector, the problems faced by the street children in their day to day life and measures adopted for their rehabilitation; their achievements and failures in Howrah have been examined.

It has been observed that the inequality phenomenon of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) could be quite useful while addressing the problem of street children in Howrah. Being unprotected and uncared many children of impoverished families are compelled to move out from the family and reach at a vulnerable situation. They start staying in places like street, railway platform, footpath, under flyover, etc. leaving the so called 'ideal family situation'. The problem is intimately associated with the socio-economic structure of the society and the cultural framework in

which the children of the poor, oppressed and deprived sections are reared and socialized.

The present study reveals that the problem of street children is basically a manifestation of certain structural contradictions in the society. Therefore there is an attempt to understand the relationship between street urchin and poverty in the given structure of the society. The other one is to examine the institutional aspects in which a child feels frustrated in the family and prefers to opt for a life of 'street children'.

It is still problematic in defining the term of 'street children'. Each country uses its own definition, but they all seem to agree on major characteristics of street children. Not only the countries but many NGOs have their own definitions of street children. The legal definition officially used refer to street children as 'children in need of care and protection'. The problem involves in the basic definition of street children often affects the aims and activities of the projects initiated by the government and other agencies towards this particular section of population.

The present study through a preliminary census survey identified 177 street children in the Howrah station and its adjacent areas. The study was explorative in nature. Of total 177 street children, 75 were selected as informants for in depth interview. They were selected randomly from different platforms of Howrah station and from its adjoining areas. They were interviewed with an interview schedule. The sample survey was conducted on the street children belonging to the age group between 6 to 15 years. Pre testing of interview schedule was done to prepare it more perfectly and accordingly some modifications were made

wherever required in the interview schedule. A systematic controlled observation technique was followed to collect data. The standardized instruments like camera and voice recorders were used to record certain observations with more accuracy.

Two focus group discussions were organized to discuss and to obtain comments and views of the participants on certain specific topics from hawkers and coolies.

Data collection continued for a period of five months from November 2012. It started from Howrah station, then Taxi stand, Ganga ghat, goods yard, Bus stand, Martin bridge, Tikiapara slum and *Sabji* market with some intermissions.

A structured questionnaire was prepared to interview government officers and N.G.O representatives to get their opinion on the concerned problem and issues.

After all those the collected data were properly coded, edited and verified with the help of code design which was prepared exclusively for this purpose. Coded data were transcribed on separate spread sheets. After data entry in computer they were analyzed by using SPSS.

The street children are mostly available in the Howrah railway station and in adjoining areas. So it was selected as the spot of intensive field study. Those areas provide shelter to large number of unauthorized people including beggars and children in its porches and platforms. So the present study confined its observations mainly among those street children located in this spot.

For these children there were several direct and immediate reasons of being on the street. Those included poverty, child abuse whether by the family or at work,

family neglect to child and few others. The other related important factors were low family income and education, disorganised family, school drop-outs, larger family size and the ineffective role of family to look after the basic needs and interests of the children.

The street children tend to concentrate in the areas suitable for their work and relatively safe stay. They also change their place of stay out of several reasons. Those include the fear of being apprehended by the police or other authorities, shrinking economic activities in the station premises, conflict with the other street children's group etc.

The street children in Howrah station area do not belong to a homogeneous group. But they prefer to stay in small groups while being on the street.

These children are originally working children, ran away, lost and abandoned who chose or were forced to leave their homes due to poverty, abuse, exploitation etc. Child abuse whether at family or at workplace has been identified as a major cause in turning those poor children into 'street children'.

They initially took up begging and other similar activities for survival or in case they have no permanent jobs or means to sustain them. Generally speaking, jobs that street children undertake most frequently include rag picking, begging, labour, van pulling, hotel boy, chop selling, ghutka selling, lemon selling etc. Here again, however, some differences and trends have been observed according to gender, age and location. The most popular jobs for boys are rag picking, begging, labour, van pulling, hotel boy, chop selling, ghutka selling etc. Meanwhile, girls often engage in lemon selling, ghutka selling activities. Small children often start

rag picking, begging, van pulling, helper in magic show activities with because they are too young to do physically demanding works. Old children like to work as street vendors after they gain certain street life experience. Many of them do more than two jobs at the same time. There is a current boom in the magic show and coin collection at the Ganga river in Howrah, neither of which existed in earlier surveys. On the other hand, there is a significant decrease in begging since that time. The most common job among street boys in Howrah is collection of empty used bottles and they sale those items at local market. Lemon selling and begging are jobs that girls often do.

Street children in Howrah suffer from various problems which include violence, community disapproval, police harassment, robberies of savings, health problems, stresses due to inability to cope with street life and lack of positive attachments. Various needs were expressed by them as direct and immediate needs which included learning a profession, having a work to sustain themselves and their families, returning back to their family. On the other hand a section of them like street life with no intention to change their situations while many others could not identify their needs as the future appears ambiguous to them.

The average age of the street children was 12 years. They were mostly either illiterates or school dropouts. This indicated a major need for literacy education and vocational training as two main options which were also expressed as main needs by street children themselves. Thus it is seen that children are going to the drop in centres run by the NGOs. Today, child homelessness is not a matter of children being thrown out in the streets by their parents. There is a larger social context that plays a role in determining the children's life chances and whether

they will grow up as part of a regular family or not. Life in the streets is the outcome of perverse combination of factors. The situation at home becoming too unbearable and the appeal and freedom found in the streets becoming too attractive to be ignored. To understand their choices, the children's larger social context was examined by describing their harsh living conditions even before they move to the streets.

Poverty, unemployment and homelessness have always followed those who migrated from the countryside to Howrah. Long-term repressive economic structures, along with dire living conditions place a heavier burden on children of the poor. Among street children, family problem is a common complaint. In Howrah, children placed under the care of the state recommended juvenile centres and those centres were not in better position to look after the children. Juvenile centers in Howrah are ill-staffed and poorly budgeted to handle their protection and reintegration into the district's mainstream. Their children face further violence, abuse and lack of emotional support.

The street children, like their parents, are the least prepared to survive under Howrah's economic conditions. Lack of schooling or professional training, they usually end up working in the informal sector, under irregular or unlawful conditions, receiving substandard benefit. Howrah's poorest children have the hardest time getting access to education, which is perhaps the central factor in their successful integration into the labour market of Howrah. Given their need to survive and the school's inadequacies, it is no surprise, then, to find children in Howrah dropping out of the system. For the poorest children in Howrah even work does not guarantee an escape from the cycle of poverty. If lack of schooling

and the ever-present threat of family problem/ violence are constants for them, so they always belong to the below poverty level. When hunger, home violence/problem, lack of schooling, and the meager results of menial work make life unbearable, life in the street represents a way out. There the children can run and hide, learn how to take care of themselves, and have the freedom to explore the adult world at their own space. For them, there is very little, if any, childhood.

Howrah, is a booming neighborhood with many industries, hotels, private schools, well off residences and the homes of the very poor. Its large Howrah railway station is busy day and night with passengers. At the station areas there is always a 'gang' of children playing, begging, or rag picking. In the context of present research, the fore shadowed questions were: Who are these children? Why are they on the street? What do they do? And what do they learn on the street?

When contact with home is still maintained on a regular basis by some children, to their attachment with home being so strong that they would never ultimately become children 'of' the street. However, their concerns and the concerns of the adults were impacted by their life on the street. The passengers, vendors, coolies and officials of the station feared that life and work on the street would rob the children of useful life goals. They thought that the children should have protection, security, and appropriate formal education so that some day they could work as 'good citizens'. On the street, the children continue to be deprived of basic necessities, affection, and socio-cultural support. These children were being punished by 'the unfortunate nature of their adversity'. They didn't deserve to be there at Howrah station, but what were the alternatives? The passengers

and vendors were clear on what they feared about these children. The fears were early criminality, drugs, killings, violence, and loss of childhood. The children on the other hand see themselves as productive participants in informal economic sector. They work and help their families. The children did not see life on the station as negatively impacting their own life goals, although none could give any specific life goals other than to 'be better off' than their parents. The negative impact of the street seemed to be denied because they all look forward to escaping through formal structures and institutions. With formal education they 'knew' they would be able to make their way in the society. They also felt protected, somewhat, in their surroundings. They could feel that the people at the station complex would not indulge any violence against them.

The station children did not recognize their own loss of childhood. They did not recognize the stress that life on the street placed on them. Because too many of them being in the street were a family necessity and they had no choice. Whatever financial help their work provided for their family, parents agreed that the children's situation was extremely insecure and dangerous on the street.

Life in the streets for these children meant unstructured childhood-no supervision, no chores, no framework within which to organize their own physical, emotional, and personal development. It offered unlimited freedom at the high cost of risks and threats to their lives. And in many instances, the appeal of the streets was experienced gradually. Many of such children had not left their home altogether. The life of street children is not as dichotomous as seen through the eyes of elite class society. It is not a matter of 'life at home' versus 'life on the street'. The children under study cannot be neatly divided into those who stay at

home (safe, innocent, and well- protected) and those who live on the streets (bitter, vicious and lacking in human skills). In a harsh urban environment, under the dire conditions of social inequality, there are many more children who are in-between home and street than any exclusive place of stay. To many of them the street is not always the place of danger, while the home is not always the shelter from life's woes.

The major difference between the children of Howrah is that some of them managed to maintain their family links. Family ties provide these children with a point of reference, a home base from which they can go out and explore, face everyday life, while knowing that there is a place to return. That sense of connection, of responsibility for others and of belonging seems to have kept the children of Howrah from reaching a point of no return. The mutual support between stakeholders and children allows for a relatively 'safe' space to exist together. It makes the street less frightening or hostile for the children and less dangerous for the stakeholders. The presence of family and friends make it possible for the children to lead a life that is not totally vulnerable while flirting with life on the street. The street children in Howrah felt that their stakeholders do not think them entirely as street urchins or criminals.

Working in the day out at a station environment or in the street is neither going to help the street children to solve their family's financial crises, nor will it give them the skills needed for future employment.

The boys who go onto the street survive through rag picking, begging and other unskilled manual activities and girls through work as maid servant, rag pickers etc.

Both boys and girls reported rag picking as the primary means of supporting themselves.

Substance abuse is a major problem among the street children. The types of substances/drugs consumed by street children include liquor, dentrite, gutka, charasetc.and which are easily available in the market.

The substance abuse among street children in Howrah may be viewed as part of their coping mechanisms to deal with street life, to endure stresses and to deal with problems of food, hunger, pain and restless nights. The street children turned to substance abuse due to the influence of peers and on the condition they remain on the street without care or protection.The common people do not support such habit of street children's habit. The street children also know the ill effect of substance / drug abuse on their health and behavior. But there was no programme for the rehabilitation of those street children who are exposed to drugs and substance abuses.

The research highlights some of the many hardships and dangers children living on the street are exposed to such as hunger and lack of shelter, support, sexual exploitation, assault, substance abuse and injury. In case of the street children sexual vulnerability is not only the experience of girls but boys as well.

Potential infection with sexual diseases through sexual assault is a risk both boys and girls face. However, girls face the additional prospect of pregnancy and its social and other consequences. The street children were found to live in groups. These groups were unconsciously formed based on a number of factors including gender, job and sometimes on age. The males often spent their days with fellow

males while the females often spent their times together. Those who are involved in similar kind of job also spent more time together. The children thus informally created a series of bridging with their peers and fellow street dwellers. Some of them have developed formal and informal work relationship with different categories of traders like food vendors and shop owners. Their struggle for a living and survival on the street certainly brought them in contact with the people engaged in petty business in and around the station area.

Street children in Howrah had altogether a different perception about health and illness. They mainly view sickness as a physical inability to move and work rather than as a suffering from a particular disease. They had hardly any knowledge about major health problems. Various health problems from which the street children in Howrah were suffered headaches, stomachache, abnormal colic, back pain, blood in the urine, breathing problem, cough, wounds in throat, diarrhea, dental problems, fever etc.

The reason why street children are more susceptible to diseases is related to their personal unhygienic habits while being on the street. Those include the habit of eating exposed and unclean foods, lack of personal cleanliness, sleeping on the open spaces and work in various unhealthy and hazardous environments, cleaning and washing in the Ganga river and other polluted water.

For treatment the street children normally go to out patient department (OPD) of government hospital or asked to NGOs for medical help. Self medication is common among them as they often approach the staff of the local pharmacy to provide them medicine on small payment.

Food and variety provided seem to be a vital tool for NGOs to attract street children to their reception centre. Food is also vital to government organizations (GOs) as well as non government organizations to feed the number of children who are fully residents in institutional care. Non vegetarian food items seem very attractive to almost all street children. Two NGOs have identified who have a capacity to store, transport and prepare food aid for the street children namely Don BoscoAshalayam and Missionary of charity. Government institutions can run a centre like Anganwadicentre but it is observed that no initiatives have been taken by the Howrah Municipal Corporation (H.M.C) to run such centre. It lacks the capacity from the government side and requires an advocacy with them. None of the NGOs have training in more than rudimentary nutritional awareness.

There are currently eleven main NGOs (Don BoscoAshalayam, SEED, Hope Foundation, NabaJeevan (Missionary of Charity), MalipukurSamajUnnayanSamity, HarijanSevakSamity, Little Big Help, Itinda Community development society, Chiranabin, Karuna, Pudar etc.) addressing the issue of street children in Howrah district. This is a clear manifestation of a growing social movement that aims to deal with the issue and a new and more supportive political environment that paves the way for NGOs to target the issue freely and in a cooperative way. The models adopted by NGOs seem to have taken the 'comprehensive approach' rather than targeting specific problems related to street children. The NGOs considered family reunion and adoption as the ultimate goal when dealing with street children.

Unlike governmental institutions, NGOs in general have a weak monitoring and evaluation policies and techniques. NGOs have the ability to raise community

awareness, although they do show signs of either collective action or coordination in this realm except on a very small scale. Dealing with the problem of street children needs the cooperation of various governmental, non-governmental and voluntary efforts. Data from survey indicate that various factors contribute to the emergence of the problem of street children in Howrah and how it could be addressed from policy perspectives. Another issue of concern which emerges from this study is the frequent violation of street children's rights by the police. Organizations working with street children related many accounts of police assaulting street children, or removing them from the streets during major programmes in the city and station area.

The special juvenile police unit of the Howrah city and rural police were set up to advice street children of services and facilities available to them and to respond to reports about street children from the public. While this was a potentially positive response to children living on the street by local government in Howrah, it appears in practice that the unit's role has become little more than that of the 'street sweeper' of children on the street, picking them up and dropping them at the Children Homes (from which they soon abscond), in a seemingly endless and futile cycle. The role of District Child Protection unit in supporting the work of the Children Homes in the district may be considered in this context. But despite this support, the very effectiveness of the shelter is often questioned by stakeholders. Many of the street children indicated that such centres currently have limited capacity to provide social work, education, and referral and after care services to the needy children.

In Howrah there is a severe lack of formal shelters with qualitative services and other forms of support for street children generally but especially for girls and older street children. The only two shelters in Howrah that caters exclusively for girls, Liluah SMM Home and Chiranabin, have the capacity to accommodate 150 girls in total.

India has a constitutional imperative to protect and promote the rights of children. As a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), India has an obligation to progressively realize the rights of all children in India, irrespective of race and gender.

Our constitution has been highly praised for its progressive outlook and for enshrining specific rights for children in the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of children) Act 2015. Article 3 of the United Nation rights of the child stipulates that a child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child. It is also important to note that unlike other clauses in the constitution the rights of children are not qualified by any reference to progressive legislation.

It is becoming apparent that through our constitutional framework and emerging policies have been developed taking cognizance of the rights of the child, the failure by the state to execute effective programmes makes these rights hollow and meaningless.

When our government, at national and local level, works towards reducing poverty and family problem and preventing more children from joining at the ranks of those living on the streets, of the street and abandoned children, it must

be remembered that the rights of those children cannot be ignored and should be defended to the fullest by all parties concerned, the state being the primary party.

Our government policy to a great extent has failed to acknowledge this fact and to address the needs of one of the most vulnerable groups in our society.

However, if policy makers of the country have spontaneity to unlearn and relearn, to ensure social equality for all and bring an end to exclusion of those marginalized children, they should take new roles in the work with children and to establish new partnership between the country and civil society.