

Life of Street Children in Howrah Station

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This paper is based on case study of some children staying in both new and old complexes of Howrah Station. It examines how family pressure forces them to leave their house and what kind of ordeal they go through while staying in the station compound. The paper also discusses the problems they face in rescue homes once they are sent there and points to the limitations in the law and public attitude towards the street children. The prime finding is that once the station children get into the delinquent culture it becomes very difficult to get out of it.

Keywords: Street children, rag pickers, addiction, abuse, deformity, misery, bourgeoisie, lumpen proletariat, dehumanization.

Introduction

The phenomenon of street children is not new in India. Many scholars have written about the street children and their miseries. Different nomenclatures, such as Rag Pickers, Homeless, Bhavaghure, Bejanm (Busterd), Haghare, runaway, thrown aways etc. are used to address them. In developing countries, like Kenya, they are called as Parking boys, in the Philippines they are known as Pogeey-boys, in Brazil they are called as Pivets. Interestingly, in Peru they are popularly known as Pajaro-frutero meaning fruit bird, and in Colombia they are called Gamin, meaning kid having negative connotation. In Zaire, these children are called as Moineaoux meaning chicks (Behura and Mohanty, 2005: 3-4).

The UNICEF (1988) defines street children as ‘...those for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, i.e., unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc...) is more than their family, has become their real home, a situation in which there is no protection, supervision or direction from responsible adults.’ The relationship with the family is very important to categories the street children.

A survey report of United Kingdom Committee (1980) for UNICEF shows that 75 percent of the street children maintain contact with families. They work on the street and stay at their home with their family at night. Some 20 percent spend all the days and some nights on the streets or in public places. Their families have not abandoned them, nor they have abandoned their families, but poverty, violence, and sexual abuse have forced them out of their homes. These children are increasingly vulnerable to the abuse and exploitation of street life and often develop a very negative view of them. Rest five percent are orphans, runaways, refugees. They do not have any family. They stay on the street and suffer from deep emotional disturbance.

The present paper is based on a study of street children in Howrah Station. Two categories of street children have been covered in this study. The first category includes those who stay in their houses at night with their parents but come to Howrah Station and its adjacent areas for work and other reasons in the morning and go back in the evening. They contribute whatever they earn to their family. These children mainly collect empty bottles or work as hawkers, collect coins at Gangaghat or do vegetables collections at *sabji* market near Howrah Bus stand. In the second category there are children who have left their families at their native places; they do not visit home on regular basis but kept contact with their families. They earn money in the station area by collecting empty water bottles, newspapers; do stealing, snatching and other delinquent activities. Some children, who are without family, live at the station premises permanently; they include the abandoned, orphans, refugees, lost children and so on.

Homeless and street children are found in large number at Howrah Station. Due to urbanization and associated pull factors, many rural poor usually come to the city in search of job. Howrah is an industrial city and places like Tikiapara, Belilious Road, Panchanantala, Salimar, Shibpur, Pilkana, Salkia, Uluberia, Phuleswar, Chengail, Bauria, Belur, Bali and Sankrail are famous for Iron, Jute and Paint Industries. Many families from the neighbouring states as well as neighbouring districts come to the city to work in those industries. Some of them get a permanent place to stay mostly in the slums and many of them do not find a place to stay and live on the pavements and railway platforms.

The presence of the families with children in and around the Howrah station is quite conspicuous.

Railway Platforms provide them with more than a home; it provides a livelihood. Some depend on the informal mobile economy in running trains. Many of them steal, beg, sing songs, dance, some of them assist the official vendors, in return for a scrap to eat or a meager amount. Some children may even make a semi-permanent living on these platforms. Platforms are thus a means of their living place, and a possible source of livelihood. The children who get into this system develop a way of life or culture of their own, which is significantly different from the 'normal' social order.

Data for the paper have been collected through observation, case study and interview method. I have done case study of twelve street children and interviewed police, old platform boys, Station Master, Porters, and Shop Keepers for different types of information. Nine of the children are 'street dwellers' who have been abandoned by their families, and the remaining three have the experiences of living in the Children's Homes. The children covered in the study age between 6 and 15 years. In the text I have used fictitious names of the children.

Howrah station

Howrah is now in the grip of rapid urbanization. Recently administrative headquarters of the state has been shifted to Nabanna near 2nd Hooghly Bridge, which is close to Howrah Station. Construction of new multistoried buildings and shopping malls has caused displacement of slum dwellers. There was a big dumping ground near the Tikiapara Railway station which was 15 minutes away from Howrah station. Many families were dwelling over there. Most of them were from Bihar. But presently that whole dumping ground has been transformed in to the Belilious Park and shopping mall. Like this many slums were transformed into big buildings and multistoried flats by many big companies like Rammingtones and others. Many of the displaced families now live close to the station premises and draw livelihood from the station area.

Howrah Station which has imperial origin has grown in size and in terms of service. Hundreds of trains cross through the station and lakhs travelling every day and this widens the opportunity for the downtrodden and the homeless make a living based on the station, the trains and the people who travel. The children who stay in the station premises live a carefree life, away from family control. Howrah Station is the earning place for them. Children collect food from the train without expenses; many of them also get food free of cost from different NGOs. They collect drinking water from the taps available in the station complex. The Hooghly River is there to take bath.

Life of the children in Howrah Station: case studies

Amur is a 13 year old Hindi speaking Muslim boy whose native place is Agra in Uttar Pradesh. He has been coming to Howrah Station for the last five years everyday, spending the whole day in the station premises. He is a dendrite addict. When I met him in platform 12 his legs were trembling. He was sucking from a piece of cloth full of dendrite glue. 'What are you doing here?' I asked. He thought I was from police and tried to escape from that place but could not escape as he was addicted. He sat on stones and concrete slabs of the railway track. I convinced him that I was not police. A fat middle aged woman proceeded towards me and asked 'what happened? I told 'nothing.' She told me 'I am Amur's mother.' If you want to know anything about him, you may ask me. I asked her 'are you the real mother of Amur?' She answered 'No. I am his foster Mother.' She went on saying: 'Amur stays with me in a rented house with me at Uluberia which is about 50 Kms. away from Howrah Station. Amur helps me collect empty disposable drinking water bottles. Early in the morning, Amur and I reach the Station. Whole day we spent over here. We eat together. We return to our rented house at night. Amur calls me Ma. I purchase clothes for him and take the necessary care.'

Amur is short in height and black in complexion. At the time of Interview, he was wearing a half banyan and black half pant, both dirty. His eyes were black but swallowing. He looked malnourished. He does his breakfast out of the food stuffs left by passengers in the trains. He loves eating Puri-Sabji and bread and banana. He takes lunch from his own money, which he earns

money selling rags in the market. Evening time he goes back to Uluberia. He eats two dendrite tubes every day. His whole income is taken away by his 'mother'.

Amur's father is an auto driver near Agra station. He has his real mother, four brothers and one sister, all live in a rented house near a red-light area, close to Agra Station. Amur suspects that his elder sister is involved in prostitution. He did not like the home atmosphere and left Agra. He loves his family but does not want to go back to Agra. He loves his so called mother and wants to stay with her.

Sanjiboni is a 15 year old Bengali girl, who hails from Champahati of South 24 Parganas. She came to Howrah Station for the first time five years ago. Since then she has been living here. Occasionally she goes home. She loves to stay at Howrah Station. She is mentally partially inert. She sells cigarettes and Ghutka in the station premises to the moving passengers. She visits one NGO office for free mid-day meal. At evening time she sells all those tobacco related products.

Sanjiboni's parents are alive. She has brothers and sisters but she does not like to stay at home with them. I asked her 'how do you live here since you are grown up, don't you feel insecure?' She only smiled and did not answer me. That time a 24 year old boy, appeared to be a porter, came to the place and asked Sanjiboni if she would want to have Chowmin? The girl left the place with the man.

Talking to other station inmates I came to know that Sanjiboni was a call girl. She is fond of eating but cannot afford the kind of food she wants. Taking advantage of the situation many porters abuse her sexually. Sanjiboni seems to have accepted her life in the station and does not want to go back and try something else.

Sriman Ghosh is 18 year old Bengali speaking Hindu boy. His father is Laxman Ghosh and mother is Kumbli Ghosh. His father is a rickshaw puller who is addicted to alcohol. His mother is a maid servant. Sriman has been detained by police many times because he is a heroin addict. When asked 'why did you leave home?' he said: 'four years back when I was 14, I first tested Heroin. For some time I used to take seven *purias* a day, each *puria*

costing Rupees twenty. I studied up to class V. My neighbours are not good. My address is K Road, Belgachia, Liluah, Howrah. I have one sister and a brother. My sister got married and brother works with her husband. My mother sent me to a Hosiery factory for work. I was earning Rupees five hundred a month. One day police came to my house and arrested me on charge of stealing a bicycle, which I did not do. Realising that the charge was false police released me. After some months I was caught again by the police in connection with another theft case'.

Sriman continued: 'I was misguided by three people of my locality who drove me to stealing. We used to work as a gang; I used to steal iron from the shop in Liluah. I earned money that way. I spent this amount on Heroin. I was also working for a group who used to sell all those drugs. One Kalia was the kingpin of this racket.'

Later Sriman joined with the rag pickers group at Howrah Station. Every day he sells empty bottles that he collects from the trains and the station premises and spends most of his money on drug. He eats the left overs that he collects from the train and sometimes buys food. He said: 'since I am addict I do not feel hungry much.' One day I saw him with the police and asked him what happened? He answered saying: 'sir, I was caught by the Police because Kalia had shot at me. I escaped from there. Please help me.'

Sanjit Debsarma is a 15 years old Bengali speaking Hindu boy. His father's name is Bhatua Debsarma. Earlier, Sanjit was working in his paddy field but after an accident he stopped working there. Sanjit has four brothers and one sister. One of his sisters, Sunita, died at her childhood due to snake bite. He comes from Karan Dighi of North Dinajpur district. Sanjit first came to Howrah Station in 2006. He worked as a hotel boy in a hotel near Ganga Ghat at Howrah Station. He was earning Rupees three thousand per month. Answering why he came to Howrah Sanjit said: 'We are poor. After an accident my father stopped working in the agricultural field. He told me to do something to save the family. I came to Howrah and took this job.' Sanjit studied up to class IV in the Palsai Primary School at Karandighi.

One day he left the hotel job and took up van pulling with his two other friends. He thought that he would earn more in this

profession. He was transporting fish and other goods that the carrier trains bring to Howrah Station from different parts of the country. He hired one van from Barabazar paying a rent of Rupees five hundred per month. He sleeps in his van. He earns Rupees two hundred fifty per day.

Sanjit takes tea and biscuit every morning paying from his pocket. He takes bath in the Ganga and use platform lavatory paying Rupees two per use. He buys his lunch and supper from his own money. He is addicted to Ghutka and Khaini. He also takes Heroin sometimes, which is easily available at Howrah Station. One puria costs Rupees one hundred twenty. He puts the drug in cigarette and smells it. He feels sleepy after having it. Sanjit visits home once in a fortnight. He gives money to his family. His elder brother Bijoy works in Mumbai as a labour. Other two brothers are studying in school. He feels proud when people call him Mutia Walla.

Karan Malakar is a 14 year old Bengali Hindu boy. He has one elder brother and a younger sister, besides his mother in his family. His family members live in a rented house at a place near Dasnagar CTI, Kajoldhighi, Howrah. Karan's elder brother works as a welder in a welding workshop. Karan's father works in Orissa and mother is a house wife. His father does not keep contact with them for many years. Karan studied up to class III. He left school after being humiliated by his friends for scoring zero in one paper. He earned a bad name in his locality for being short tempered. He was also caught several times while stealing and was beaten up. He also picked up the habit of gambling at an early age. One day he quarreled with his elder brother and father and ran away from house. He reached Howrah station without knowing what to do. The first day he had his food from the other children living at the Station. After three days he met a porter who offered him food. The porter, whom he calls Chacha, helped him getting into the life that Howrah station offers.

He is staying near the parcel office of the Sation for last two years. He is a van puller and earns Rupees two hundred fifty per day. He sleeps in his van or at any open clean place on the new platforms at night. He wakes up at around 6 am and goes to Ganga for washing his mouth. In breakfast he takes milk (or tea) and bread. He takes rice with fish for lunch. He also eats *chap-muri* in the

evening. He takes supper with *roti* and *tarka*. He buys his clothes from Mangal Hat. He purchases soap, oil and other necessary items with his own money. After all this, he saves Rupees fifty per day, on an average. He takes bath at Ganga and uses toilet at the new station complex. He has been caught by police several times for his involvement in illegal activities. He is addicted to tobacco, Ganja. He loves to watch movie.

Karan dislikes the rag pickers calling them Kachrawala (rag pickers). They use blade for stealing money from the bags of the passengers and even snatch money and other valuable items. He distinguishes him from this group of rag pickers claiming 'I am good. I am Mutiawala.' Karan goes to Banga Basi Cinema with his friends to watch movie. He said: 'once I went to Mumbai in search of better job with my friends but reaching there my friends started collecting empty bottles. I could not do it because I was not Kacrawala (rag picker). I came back to Howrah. Nowadays I feel like leaving Howrah Station. I need to live with a good image of myself. I want to go back to my family and do some job of dignity with my elder brother'.

Anand Sarkar is a 15 year old Bengali Hindu boy. He spent his childhood with his parents in Assam but could not remember the name of his village. His father passed away at his childhood. He does not remember him. After his father's death, his mother left her in-laws' house in Assam and reached Mainaguri in Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. He came to know from his mother that his father was a rickshaw puller. Anand was their only child.

Anand's maternal uncle's house is at Mainaguri. Anand and his mother were living at his maternal uncle's house in Mainaguri after his father's death. Anand was admitted to a school there. His mother had tumour in her stomach. She died when Anand was merely seven year old. His maternal uncle had one son and one daughter. He was a petty trader and his income was low. His maternal aunt used to collect woods from the forest and sell them as firewood in the local market. They deployed Anand for collection of wood from the forest. But Anand did not like it. One day Anand returned from forest without collecting anything from the forest and his aunt did not offer him any food. He was thirsty and hungry. His uncle said: 'if you do not earn, you will not get food. Give me Rupees one hundred everyday for your food lodging.'

Anand was very depressed. He decided to leave his maternal uncle's house and reached at New Jalpaiguri Station. He boarded a train to land at Howrah Station next morning.

In Howrah Station he got in touch with the rag pickers and became one of them. One day at Howrah station when he was checking train to collect food; he got a bundle of Rupees. The other children chased him for this money but Anand ran to Police and deposited the bundle. Police counted it to be Rupees ten thousand. Many people thanked him for his honesty. Asked about the reason for his action Anand said: 'I didn't have a choice; had I not gone to police the other children would have killed me for money'.

After this incident police took initiative to send him back to his uncle's family at Mainaguri. But after one month Anand came back to Sealdah station and started living with the station boys. Later he was rescued by the police and was sent to Kishalaya Home (Government run Home) for his rehabilitation. Later Home authority restored him to his maternal uncle's house again.

After one month again Anand came back to Howrah Station and chose his old profession i.e. rag picking. He also tried his luck in rickshaw pulling but soon gave it up as the income was low. He now does van pulling in fish market and earns Rupees one hundred per day. Anand is not happy with his present job. He said: 'Now I am 15 year old. I want a permanent job in future. I want to leave Howrah Station. I want to escape from this hell soon'.

Amirul Sk. is a 15 year old boy, who lives in the New Complex of Howrah Station. Amirul is widely known as Rajdhani among the station inmates. I know Rajdhani for almost 6 years. Amirul came to be known as Rajdhani from his childhood because he used to check Howrah-New Delhi Rajdhani Express in old complex. A very thin and dark boy of medium height is always busy running to all the platforms of old complex the whole day, collecting food, empty bottles and other staffs left behind by the passengers.

Rajdhani is a Madrasi Muslim. Being asked about his address he said: 'The only thing I remember is that I came from Madras to Howrah by train. I don't remember my address in Madras. I never visited my native place thereafter.' He went on telling about his life: 'Here I check trains and collect foods. I also collect empty

bottles. I am addicted to dendrite. I consume three tubes in a day. I also love chewing Ghutka. I sleep on the platforms at night. I visited rehabilitation centres many times but could not adjust with life there. Eventually I came back to the Station. I like the carefree life in Howrah Station. One day the police sent me to the jail lodging a case against me. I am only 15 and have married two times. My first wife left me. My present wife lives with me and she also collects bottles from the trains. We live at the New Complex of Howrah station. It is called Delhi end of the platform 17. We cook food and eat there. During the Id I go to my mother-in-law's house at Panskura in Paschim Medinipur. I head a team of 12 children who work under me as rag pickers. I help them financially. I also protect them from any problem. I do not want to leave Howrah Station. It's good life here.'

Samir and Sudip. In a winter afternoon on platform 23 of the New Complex I saw two children putting the empty water bottles into the sacks. I approached them asked their names. The younger one, about 10 year, answered 'Sudip'. Sudip wore a half shirt and a full pant, not enough to protect in that winter. The older one, Samir, was about 12 years of age. Samir wore blue colour sweater and black full pant. Both of them were merely four feet height. They are brothers in relationship.

They told me that they will sell the accumulated empty bottles for fifteen rupees a kilo to some fixed traders at the Martin Bridge area near Howrah Station. They together earn Rupees one hundred per day. Sudip told me that their father is alcoholic and does not contribute his income to the family. They came to Howrah Station to earn money as they were left with no other option. Samir and Sudip spend night at their house and come to Howrah station every morning after taking breakfast. They eat some snacks for lunch and go back home at night and take their dinner there. Before taking up rag picking, both the brothers were studying in school close to their house.

Sarup Kumar Das is a 13 year old Bengali Speaking Hindu boy. He lost his father in his early childhood. His Mother Rekha Das then left her in-laws' house and started living at her mother's place at Chaingail of Howrah. After some years her mother married a Muslim man. Sarup has an elder sister and two younger step sisters. Sarup's mother, Rekha Devi, works as a maid earning Rupees one

thousand five hundred per month.

Sarup is staying in Howrah station for the past few years. He stays at different platforms but presently at platform 12 with other children. His friends are Nonia, Raju, Mongal and so on. He wakes up at around 4 in the morning and starts collecting empty bottles from the trains. He continues with his work until 10 am. Selling the bottles thus collected he earns Rs. 50-60 and buys his breakfast out of this money. After that he visits one of the NGOs which run Day Care centers and he stays over there till 4 in the afternoon. He takes his lunch over there. He then comes back to the station and engages himself in rag picking, which he continues till 9 p.m. He spends a part of his earning buying dendrite and some other drugs. He can buy some food for his supper. Again he goes back to the platform and sleeps alongside his friends.

Often the Railway protection force makes arrangement for restoration in his family. Every time he comes back to the station and does the same work. Once I accompanied Sarup to his native place. His place was near Chainmail Railway station in Howrah District. After getting down at the Chaingail station I walked with him and reached his place. It was like a squatters' settlement. Sarup's mother was sitting in front her house. His mother was so happy to see him. But Sarup shouted saying: 'I will not stay here. She is not my mother. My mother has died. I am an orphan.' Sarup Kumar was not in mood to accept the lady as his mother. His mother retorted saying 'You take back this boy. This boy will spoil other children of my family. He takes drug. He has stealing habit.' Sarup jumped out and said: 'I will kill this lady.' Actually Sarup loved his grandmother very much who is no more. He, however, loves his elder sister, who is married. He wanted to take me to his sister's place but I had to return. Sarup was angry because he could not accept his mother's second marriage. This marriage caused a detachment between the two and Sarup grew up without parent's care. His grandmother took care of him but Sarup grew wild after her death. In Howrah station he has received peer-group support. He was abused sexually by the older street boys. After being rescued by an NGO he has been sent to a rehabilitation centre.

Ananth Narayan is famous by the name Appu in Howrah Station. He is loved by others for his sweet, smiling nature. He is 15 years old boy. He can speak Bengali very well. His level of intelligence is

poor compared to his age. The boy was merely seven years when he came to Howrah Station first. He collects empty bottles from trains at New Complex of Howrah Station. He is a part of the gang headed by Rajdhani. Rajdhani helps him in getting cooked food and snacks. In return, Rajdhani gets a part of his income. About himself Ananth said: 'I am from Chennai. When I was five years old, I got separated from my family. I board a train and landed up at Kharagpur Station. I stayed there for a few days. Later I was brought to Howrah by other station children.' He has already forgotten Tamil. He stayed at the Howrah Station with other boys and did all those train checking activities. Ananth could remember his father and mother. He had two brothers and two sisters but he could not remember their names. After a few months, when I went to Howrah Station I came to know that police had caught him on the charge that he had stolen a mobile phone. His friends think that Ananth is an honest boy and the charge is false. Mejo Babu (Second Officer) of Police station knows us. He is a kind hearted man. He understood the problem. He has sent Ananth to a Children's Home. I went to the Children's Home for boys to meet Ananth. Ananth was sitting on the floor. I asked him about his health, food, education and his experience of present life. He said: 'I am confined here. I cannot go to play. I cannot go outside the school. I am often beaten up by the Dada in the Home. I don't get good food...' He asked me 'Can you please get me out of this hell? He also told me 'last week six children escaped from here.' After few days of my visit, Ananth too ran away from the Home to return to Howrah Station.

Prakash was a 15 year old boy who escaped from the Juvenile Home and came to Howrah Station. I met him at the New Complex of the Station. He was very unclean and wore dirty cloths. He was chewing tobacco and walking on the platform in a very lazy mood. Asked why he escaped from Home he said: 'That Chillar Home (Children of Howrah Station used to call children's home like that) is unfit for living. Most of the inmates suffer from malnutrition and suffer from diseases like scabies and jaundice etc. The normal and sick children use same plate for eating food. The quality of the cooked food was very poor. There is no care for children. It was suffocating. Thank God, I managed to escape. I am happy in the station.'

Prakash came to Howrah Station about five years ago. He hails from Patna of Bihar. His father is a mason and mother is a labourer. He has one brother. His mother loves his brother very much. She used to beat Prakash. Prakash did not like this behavior. His father is an alcoholic. One day he decided to leave his house. At the Station Prakash collects empty bottles from the trains in the morning time and collects coins at the Ganga *ghat* at the evening. He earns Rs. 200 per day. He spends most of his money on food and drugs like dendrite, solutions etc.

Moli, a 14 years old girl, was rescued by Santragachi GRPS in Howrah District when she was wandering on the platform. Some passengers saw the girl chatting with a few station boys in the platform; they called the police and requested them to help the girl. Passengers suspected that the girl might be trafficked by others as she was new to the station area. Police took her in their custody and interrogated her. She told the police that she has run away from a Home, but she could not remember the name of the Home. From her appearance it appeared that she was mentally disturbed, if not mentally ill. She was taken to the hospital for the medical checkup and the doctors gave medicines. That girl gave some clues like her father's name, mother's name and her native place, which were not sufficient to trace her family. The girl was sent in a Home in Howrah District. After some time the girl ran away from the Home and came back to Howrah Station, where an insecure, vulnerable life awaits her.

Summing up, the case studies, one can identify these common features: (a) uncongenial family atmosphere ejects children from their own family, (b) addiction, particularly for the boys, acts as a pull factor to remain them on the street, (c) most of the children work as rag picker, van puller and porter to draw a livelihood, (d) the children do not work independently; they work as a part of a system, a gang, which runs on informal but inescapable rules, (e) poverty in the family pushes them on the street, (f) family with disturbed relations and without love and affection makes the children flee their homes, (g) toil and hardships make the children mature early, it is possible that they are exposed to sex at an early age, (h) the carefree life at the station works as an attraction and that is why the children who were sent to Children's Homes have returned to station life, (i) girls are more vulnerable; they can easily

fall into prostitution and get trafficked, (j) the boys are subjected to sexual and economic exploitation, (k) even some boys live a family life on the station platform, and physically in general, (l) while some children work at the station during day time and go back to their family in the evening some others are homeless and they live in the station permanently, (m) children often fall into the trap of the drug traffickers; some of them even sell drugs and police use them as spy and also harass them on charges of theft, (n) children in the station are engaged in delinquent activities like stealing, snatching, bag lifting etc., (o) the station lavatory and the Ganga river come as good amenities for everyday use by the children, and (p) for poor facilities and management the Children's Homes are not considered as a means to rehabilitation of the street children. Overall, the life of the children unravel how poverty, disturbed families and inadequate social support system push a section of children into a delinquent world of station life, which is so much different from normal life that protects the rights of the children and ensures healthy upbringing.

Forms of abuse that the children face

The present study reveals that the children who live in Howrah Station and in Government run and non-government Homes are subjected to various forms of abuse. In this section I have given an idea of the forms of abuse the children face.

Physical abuse: In the case studies outlined above we have seen that child abuse has become an accepted reality. A large number of children leave their own family as a result of ill-treatment by the parents and the close kin. There are Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2000 and POSCO to protect the children from abuse but the provisions of the Acts are often violated. Reminded of the impact of ill treatment on the psyche of the children the parents responded saying: 'He/she is my child. I can do anything with him/her. Will you give him/her food? Why are you advising me about how I should treat my child? The child is like that. He/she does not care for anything. Many times he/she left home. If you care for him/her, take him/her with you. Then you will understand.'

Asked about abuse of children the police officers said: 'It is true

that parents send their children to Howrah Station to beg money because of poverty. Some children's parents lived their life at the station. Some of them come from the adjacent areas of Howrah Station and some of them are orphans. Those who live at the station are often engaged in criminal activities and we apply our own method to put a check on them. For maintaining law and order we cannot be soft on them; they are criminals. If the situation goes out of control we will be censured by our superiors.'

The children who draw their livelihood from the station and trains work as members of different gangs and each gang has an agreed upon jurisdiction. But, gang fights can take place when a gang intrudes into another gang's territory. Each one has separate platform and separate boggie for train checking. The gang members generally follow the agreed upon rules but the incidents of gang fight is also not uncommon. Some boys said: 'we are not allowed to enter in the compartments or trains meant for another gang and if we enter those compartments we get beaten up'. The shop keepers in the station premises said: 'these boys disturb the customers. They beg from them when they come to our shop. We feel bad because our business suffers. Customers complain us about them. When we are too annoyed we beat them up or give them a heavy dose of scolding.'

Some porters said: 'yes, it creates a lot of problems. Many passengers and vendors use their labour paying a meagre amount or just by giving them some food. Thus we lose income. These children are addicted to drugs like solution, dendrite, *ganja*, charas, heroin, *sharab* (alcohol), cigarette, *biri*, *gutka* and so on. They steal food, money, mobile phone and other materials from the passengers and even from our shops. We do not want them here. They are kangali (penniless). We gave them good thrashing when we get an opportunity.' Asked about the station children the chairman of the Child Welfare Committee said: 'they have formed criminal gangs in the station and do the organized crime.'

Sexual abuse: Sexual abuse is another matter about which it is very difficult to obtain information from the children directly. But with closer observation, daily contacts, good rapport one can get a sense of sexual abuse and sexual behavior of the children. Police only records the incidents of rape or murder in the station premises. Sexual abuse occurs mainly in the families, among the children

who live in the station and even in juvenile Homes.

One boy told me 'with money you can buy kiss. We get 10 kisses from Rinki for Rs. 10.' The other boys confirmed the information. Rinki is a 10 year old girl, who stays with her mother in the station and does rag picking. There have been incidents of sexual abuse of male children by other males, especially at night. Each girl living in the station has a boyfriend who provides her security and that girl is often sexually exploited. The illicit relations may result into pregnancy and birth of a child. I know a 17 year old boy called Japani who is a rag picker and leader of a gang. He married a girl who also was a station girl. They had two children. After some years the girl left him and went away with a porter when Japani was in jail for some criminal activities. Now Japani has come back and married another girl Pinki who was the ex-wife of another station boy.

Most of the Juvenile Homes has no arrangement for protecting the children from sexual abuse. The older boys often sexually exploit the younger ones who sleep in the same room. There is no separate living arrangement for the street children, lost children, or ran away children. So it is always a heterogeneous group where there could be children who had already been sexually abused. They carry on with the habit while living in the juvenile Homes. It is possible that those who have been sexually abused in course do the same with the younger boys and girls.

Solvent and drugs abuse: Almost all the children staying in the Howrah Station are addicted to solvent like dendrite, solution (adhesive used for cycle repairing), iodex, nitrogen ten tablets, etc. These products are generally used as the adhesive and commonly available in the station premises or in the shops close to the station. Drugs like heroine, charas, *ganja*, and alcohol are also available close to the station premises. Most of the children shared their experiences with me stating that initially some of the older boys who were already drug addicts induced them to taste one drug or the other and they took it as adventure. But gradually they became addict. This seems to a peer-group effect and the station children cannot escape it. There are rackets that run the drug trade. The children justify their addiction saying: this reduces our hunger and helps forget the harsh reality of life'.

Economic abuse: The children who work as rag pickers sell their collection to the traders who operate from areas close to the station. The boys say they earn between Rs. 150 and Rs. 200 per day. I visited a shop near the headquarters of Detective Department of Howrah City Police, located at the crossing of Tikiapara Road and Bye pass. It is very small room of 8/ 4' size. Empty bottles are stock piled within and outside the rooms in sacks. A middle-aged man sitting in the shop said: 'they (street children) bring the empty bottles and we buy their collection. A child can earn Rs. 40 to Rs. 100 in a day. A child can collect 5 Kg. of bottles on an average; 15-16 bottles make one Kg. The children keep changing the shops where they sell their collection, according to their convenience. The children generally use the money to buy drugs and food items. They usually come either at noon or in the evening to sell the bottles. For one Kg. of bottles without cap they get Rs. 20 to 25 and for one Kg. of cap Rs. 15. If the bottles are clean the rate can be marginally higher. Most children spend their money on food and drugs; they can hardly save any money for their future. Indirectly they do provide cleaning service to the Station and thus save money for the railways authority. This shop owner told me that he sells all these bottles to a middle man, who, in turn, takes them to factories for recycling.

Concluding observations

The railway station provides opportunities for the children of impoverished and disturbed children some opportunities for income and for living a life of subsistence. Some even live a family life on the platform. The station children provide different kinds of services to the society while working as porter, van puller and rag pickers. Thus they not only provide labour to the informal economy but also provide free cleaning services and help recycle the used bottles and plastic. Thus, they indirectly provide labour for the big industries that produce plastic-based commodities in exchange of a very meagre amount. The street children are very much a part of exploitation network (production relations) of the bourgeois system.

However, they get into a different life world where the rights of the children are often violated. The children below the age of 14 have to work, do many delinquent activities like stealing and drug

taking. They also become sexually active at an early age. The growing girls are the most vulnerable sections of street children. Taking advantage of their poverty they are subjected to various forms of sexual abuse. They can even be trafficked to different cities. The boys are also sexually abused by the older street children and the cycle continues. The boys lose their children at an early age. They marry before the permissible age and have children. The rag pickers work as part of a gang under a gang leader and each gang operates in a particular area to avoid conflict with other gangs. The conflict among the gangs is not uncommon. Thus the station life has its own informal rules. The boys and girls who make a living based on the station are often taken into custody by police for various delinquent behaviours. The police also make efforts to rescue them and send them to their families or rehabilitation Homes. But they station boys and girls come back to their station life.

Weak family ties, uncongenial home atmosphere, poor economic conditions, peer pressures, influence of vested interests, drug addiction, unbearable conditions in rehabilitation Homes, the care-free station life, easy sex – all these block the possibility for these children getting out of their present life. The weaknesses in our social system thus allow children, the future of nation, spoil their childhood, and choose a life that reproduces delinquency. The system subjects the children to different forms of abuses and allows rampant violation of their rights.

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