

AN ANALYSIS ON THE LIVING CONDITIONS AND DEMOGRAPHY OF STREET CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE KOLKATA MUNICIPAL AREA, WEST BENGAL

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Abstract:

The street children suffer from psychological illnesses as a result of the traumatic experiences of physical and sexual abuse and violence in their past. Street children frequently experience depression, suicidal thoughts, and a high frequency of mental problems. These kids have a strong sense of self-loathing, which makes them extremely vulnerable, especially in the absence of appropriate assistance. Uncontrollably high emotions are frequently heightened by trauma. Drugs are probably used by many to lessen pain. Because of this, street children especially those who are considered to be "of" the street are more likely to engage in early sexual activity and abuse drugs. They also tend to have had less or no contact with their families and to have lived on the streets for longer than children who work on the streets. In this article, an analysis on the living conditions

and demography of street children with special reference to the Kolkata municipal area, West Bengal has been discussed.

Keywords: Demography, Street, Children, Kolkata.

INTRODUCTION:

This research study focuses on children who live at the Sealdah railway station in Kolkata, West Bengal. It explores the daily lives of homeless railway street children in street situations (referred to as CISS in this study) and questions about how precarious these lives are. Research on the daily lives of street children is crucial for a number of reasons. Despite the fact that street children are a visible part of many urban locations, such as major crossroads, train platforms, urban street slums, and urban garbage dumps, policy interventions by both state and non-state actors appear to have accomplished very little in making them "visible." There are conflicting reports regarding the number of street children in India's urban areas, with some classifying them as "invisibles" (Save the Children 2019) or as "nowhere" children (Rustagi 2009). Consequently, official estimates of the extent of street child presence are lacking. Researchers and non-governmental organizations have pointed out that a major factor in these disparities is the definitional problems surrounding street children. Second, in terms of their daily lives, children living on the streets are subjected to elevated levels of risk, violence, exploitation, and insecurity. The accompanying vulnerabilities are numerous and necessitate the involvement of non-state actors as well as policy interventions at various governmental levels where the government has not been able to offer even the most basic services and care to address these numerous vulnerabilities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Research Type:

The substance of the study's data is defined by the type of analysis used. Due to the nature of the data, current work is both qualitative and quantitative in character, but it is primarily quantitative

in nature because the majority of the analysis's findings center on quantifiable measurements. The researcher conducted a qualitative investigation of the idea that children migrate to the streets of Kolkata Municipal Wards Area due to the backdrop of financial hardship and that non-income forms of poverty are the actual immediate and underlying determinants of child migration.

Sample Design:

It is nearly impossible to analyze the entire universe in some scientific circumstances; sampling is the only other option. Ensuring that the respondents fulfill the fundamental requirements of the inquiry was the primary goal of the process for selecting the analytical sample.

Characteristics of Sample:

Sample size: 600 street children.

Age: 6-14 years selected from streets of Kolkata.

Gender: Male and Female both.

Other: Data was collected from the children and their families who are already migrated to the streets of Kolkata after birth.

Sampling Method:

Sampling method was employed to select the sample; due to this, the Gender Distribution is not equal. Investigator and also NGOs on behalf of the researcher convinced the sample for an interview, on the basis of understanding and properly responding ability against the Structured Schedule. Interview, Observation and Schedule methods was applied for data collection.

Variables under study:

- i) Dependent variables- Street Children.
- ii) Independent Variables- Migration and Poverty.

Data Collection:

In order to obtain accurate and comprehensive data for research endeavors, data collection refers to the methodical process of gathering and analyzing data from sources. The gathering of information is a common practice in all fields of study, including the humanities, social sciences, and physical and biological sciences. It enables researchers and analysts to gather important components from their data. Even though the approaches differ in what they cover, it is still important to keep the order accurate and truthful. For research to remain credible and to produce top-notch results and discoveries, up-to-date data collection is crucial. Study targets' primary and secondary sources are both useful resources.

Primary Data:

Primary records gathered directly from the source are known as uncooked statistics. Primary statistics are gathered via tests, questionnaires, observations, interviews, and surveys from a first-hand perspective. Special discoveries obtained by direct investigation are called primary data. It included the important information from assessments, questionnaires, measurements, and interviews with NGOs that are recognized.

Secondary Data:

Secondary data refers to information gathered independently of the user. Secondary information is gathered for a different reason by a researcher unrelated to the analysis or research study. In the past, this type of data was more affordable and easily available than primary data. Sources of secondary data collection are as follows

- Government department's journals,
- NGOs / Organizational records,
- Magazines,
- Journals, books,
- Newspapers and
- The information which is collected originally for other research purposes.

ANALYSIS, RESULTS, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:

Since the 1990s, street children—also referred to as "invisible," "forgotten," and "nowhere" children—have been recognized as a particularly vulnerable demographic. Among these kids, the "homeless" kids that this research focuses on constitute an even more marginalized and excluded category, even after years of effort by national and international civil society organizations and government agencies. Government-conducted population surveys still fail to include these children, and the agencies that work to ensure the welfare of these kids are unable to provide accurate estimates of their numbers.

It would be insensitive and unethical to overlook the pandemic's consequences for this population group, even though the study did not address the pandemic's background. The following observations are made specifically with reference to India by the Consortium for Street Children (CSC 2020), which has been actively gathering information about this globally: "Some of CSC's network members have reported increases in violence against children in street situations during the pandemic."

According to Safe Society, a member of the CSC network in India, pre-existing respiratory ailments to which these children are especially vulnerable are causing them and their families to be perceived as "facing high discrimination and torture." Safe Society states that the number of calls to the national childline increased by 50% between March 25 and March 31, with 30% of those calls pertaining to abuse and violence, according to Childline Foundation India.

Homeless street children continue to be a problem in urban India, as they do in many developing nations across the world, despite promises made in international covenants like the UNCRC, the protection of children's rights mentioned in the Indian Constitution Articles 15(3) and (39), and the numerous laws that support the rights and protection of vulnerable children at different levels (e.g., the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012, the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children)

Act, 2015, and the National Policy for Children, 2013). In addition to these legislative mandates and welfare programs administered by the federal and state governments, a great deal of work has been put in by national and international civil society organizations, mainly since the UNCRC was ratified, to guarantee a better future for CISS.

Alongside these initiatives, a sizable corpus of scholarly research—in both the Global North and the Global South—has emerged around CISS. This academic work, as I mentioned in contexts One and Two, is divided into two main strands: one stems from the field of policy studies and is primarily quantitative, while the other stems from childhood studies and various theoretical positions in the social sciences and is primarily qualitative with some quantitative methodology focus. However, there hasn't been a lot of academic research in India using CISS in line with this second strand. Almost no work in India has attempted to provide a conceptual understanding of the everyday realities of CISS or their agency in the face of structural violence, going beyond the descriptive with a specific focus on homeless street children in railway stations through a theoretical lens. My research falls into this second strand and can be considered a point of convergence between the fields of childhood studies and other social science studies. These fields have recently placed a strong focus on the social constructivist paradigm as a means of explaining children's daily lives and childhoods in a variety of contexts. In addition to departing from the commonly adopted path of devaluing various welfare interventions in this literature, which avoids an examination of the institutional dimensions of the issues and concerns related to policies, schemes, and interventions for CISS endorsed and implemented by the state and NGOs, I also took a different tack by using a social constructivist approach to examine issues of both structure (i.e., the macro-social and institutional context) and agency (i.e., means of resistance and subversion) in the daily lives of CISS.

The following are the main research issues I aimed to address with this study:

1. How are the identities of homeless street children in Sealdah created on an individual and group level? How do the kids deal with the constant designation that they are "less than normal children"? What characterizes the marginal and deviant urban subculture that these groups belong to?

2. What dynamics exist both inside and between CISS subgroups, and what function do these processes serve in meeting CISS members' fundamental emotional and material needs?

3. In what ways do NGOs and the state intervene in the day-to-day activities of CISS in Sealdah? How do these entities' conceptions, plans, and programs for CISS rehabilitation relate to and differ from the lived realities of CISS?

I provide a summary of my points made in relation to my main research issues in this final context. After that, I give a summary of the main theoretical points I made in my research as well as the methodological advancements this work brings. I also go into detail on the policy implications of this study for CISS.

This extensive qualitative study was conducted mostly through fieldwork with homeless street children (CISS) in the vicinity of Kolkata, West Bengal's Sealdah Railway Station. Numerous itinerant CISS were involved in the study, and a particular cohort of 11 street kids was closely monitored and had frequent conversations with researchers. This cohort remained relatively constant throughout the trial.

Upon reviewing my preliminary fieldwork with CISS, themes pertaining to street children's identification, stigmatization, and subculture emerged, elements that are also present in the larger body of literature on the subject. I looked at these issues in Context Three by evaluating the empirical data from my fieldwork with CISS. This demonstrated how CISS rejected the ascriptive identity categories of caste, ethnicity, and religion in their daily lives. These categories are clearly evident and are given priority in the majority of work with children in Indian contexts. It was clear that there was a conscious effort to forge a new identity on the streets that could be both flexible in terms of its nominal descriptor and completely untraceable to their previous identities and addresses. This malleability depends on the child's unique charm in relation to other kids and the place he was able to carve out for himself in the street groupings. Their self-labeling and

identification as "rastar chhele/meye" (street boys/girls) served as a simultaneous indicator of how society perceived them as "others." This category was also used to express an identity that was distinct from typical middle-class childhoods in terms of resilience and self-reliance. There were variances based on gender, with female offspring adopting names their male partners wanted them to have and assuming a submissive role to their male counterparts.

Context Three also covered the stigmatization of "children of the street" by various stakeholders that CISS encountered on a daily basis. Among CISS, many coping strategies were noted as a response to being called thieves, filthy, and unreliable, as well as the common perception of girls as sex workers. Girls made an attempt to conform to more widely accepted societal norms of being perceived as "good girls," whereas male youngsters reinforced these labels by demonstrating indifference and even a sense of pride in the aggressive or rogue masculinity some of the labels connoted for those who thus named them. Their attempts to bond with certain male partners and their emotional and physical interactions with them were clear indications of this. The kids did, however, also exhibit certain strategic posturing, which they believed would enable them to establish a comparatively stronger sense of safety than they would be subjected to in the absence of such self-representations. Substance abuse and an underlying (subconscious) fear of what lay ahead for them seemed to indicate how CISS, although conscious of the self-destructive nature of some of their activities, attempted to cope with this awareness. CISS was perceived as self-aware of their non-normative ways of being.

In contrast to institutional venues like shelters and residential homes, the street gave a contradictory sense of security and independence that was closely associated with the CISS subculture. Peer relationships, albeit inherently precarious, were also utilized as a means of achieving a sense of security through emotionally charged and rhetorical performative gestures. This sense of security was more pronounced for girls in the ties they developed with surrogate families. Furthermore, "kaaj" (work or labor) and their pride in this labor, which mostly came from different kinds of street activities, were essential components of the CISS subculture. These included cleaning and washing in tiny hotels, selling stolen or subpar goods and gadgets at a

discount, gathering leftovers from train compartments, trafficking drugs, and unloading big supplies from trucks at the local wholesale market. The sense of independence and resilience that these activities involved and fostered, in comparison to normative childhoods, was the source of CISS's pride in these activities. It's interesting to note that regardless of the kind of activity they participated in—whether it was considered deviant or non-deviant—these actions were not perceived to have any distinct normative implications.

The socialization processes and intra- and intergroup dynamics that were also an important part of the CISS subculture were examined in Context 4. Gender- and age-based induction procedures were noted, and they heavily relied on the new member's prospective worth as a contributor to group activities. This socialization process included mentoring into instrumental competences necessary for street survival for male children. On the other hand, for the female children, being deemed appealing from a sexual standpoint had a significant impact on being incorporated into a group. During the fieldwork time, I did not come across or hear of any groups with only female members. One of the most crucial factors in determining leadership was access to information, which leaders and other group members strategically used to influence intra- and intergroup dynamics in both positive and negative ways (i.e., to maintain group solidarity or cause divisions within the group). The leaders' and other members' use of instrumental and emotional competencies produced a delicate yet strong sense of trust known as "biswas." This trust was based on how these competencies manifested in the group's interests and in the particular activities that the group engaged in. Nevertheless, despite sporadic fights between groups due to vested interests that could be emotional (mostly sexual relationships) or material/instrumental, the various groups were seen to share a greater identity known as "rastar chhele," which allowed them to come together for any common cause, particularly when dealing with other stakeholders.

My research's Context 5 examined the intervention approaches and initiatives that NGOs and the government have implemented for CISS. The context began by looking at the legal justifications for CISS in both the international and Indian contexts. Next, it provided a critical analysis of how inadequate the institutional apparatuses in India are for putting the human-rights perspective—

which has been the dominant perspective promoted globally since the UNCRC—into practice. After that, examples of educational and occupational skills interventions were drawn from the fieldwork so that researchers could look at how the creativity, customs, and interactions related to these interventions were different between CISS, implementing organizations (mostly non-governmental organizations), and the people who did the work. These variations highlighted how CISS-related intervention models fall short of taking into account the current skills, fears, and life experiences of CISS, despite being rhetorically and programmatically endowed by NGOs with a rights-based viewpoint. In general, programs adopted by NGOs and the practices of their staff at the implementation level are observed to be dominated by paternalistic and welfare-based approaches that continue to align with a perceived needs-based perspective for addressing the issues of vulnerable children, as opposed to emancipatory or liberatory approaches that align more with a rights-based perspective.

Contributions:

Theoretical

The study adds to the body of research on CISS in the Indian setting that has already been done in the fields of childhood studies and other social science disciplines, primarily anthropology and sociology. Although a body of work has been done in this area (see Mathur 2009; Dabir and Athale 2011; Balagopalan 2014), it is not as extensive as what has been done in similar contexts around the world (like Latin America) or even in comparison to the more empirically descriptive studies that have been done on the state of CISS and related programmatic interventions. The latter have taken the form of more in-depth survey surveys involving numerous cities and have been largely conducted by large NGOs like Save the Children (see Save the Children 2011; 2016; 2019). With the exception of Balagopalan (2014), the theoretical significance of the previous body of work in the Indian context is also limited. The majority of the other studies primarily use descriptive methodological paradigms to examine the various factors that contribute to CISS, the difficulties they encounter, and the types of interventions that the government and non-governmental organizations carry out. In order to close this gap, the current work uses a social constructivist

theoretical paradigm to address several important conceptual concerns pertaining to CISS while also utilizing a variety of social science fields. As noted by Balagopalan (2011), Hopkins and Sriprakash (2016), and Menon and Saraswathi (2018), the social constructivist paradigm, in contrast to the more prevalent discourse of modernity and of a universal childhood that represents the experiences of more privileged childhoods in both the Global North and the Global South, helps to provide a contextual and culturally situated critical understanding of vulnerable children.

The theoretical limits of the previous research on identity, stigma, and subculture among CISS are expanded on multiple fronts in this study. First, even in critical ethnographic research (e.g., Balagopalan 2014), the topic of the day-to-day lived realities of girl-children among CISS has rarely been addressed individually in the Indian context. The dissertation addresses the gender question directly through these topics, albeit in a restricted manner, and highlights the gender-based disparities that exist in the way identity, stigma, and subculture function among CISS. Second, even though the topic of CISS as "deviants" and "outsiders" has been discussed in great detail in the study on CISS that is now available, Erving Goffman's work is highlighted by the way CISS negotiates this "outsider" status through a variety of self-representations. Depending on the circumstances, the CISS appeared to perform and present distinct impressions of themselves (Goffman 1978). Moreover, their stigmatization by society at large drove them to employ complex self-images in order to comprehend and communicate who they were to others (Goffman 1963). Even though street children present a variety of identities, the label "children of the street" is reinforced in their daily lives by a variety of stakeholders and institutions, as seen by their own frequently repeated affirmations of their identity. Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence" was perceived to be relevant to this (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Third, the subculture of the CISS revealed how it was mediated by "strategic opportunizing," where children's agency and the structural constraints on it were evident in the different instrumental and emotional aspects of the relationships that constituted their daily lives. It was also about the assertion of a set of cultural norms distinct from normative childhoods (e.g., Willis 1977).

Analyzing intra- and inter-group dynamics among CISS brought the concepts of socialization and trust to the forefront. Similar to earlier research, the socialization of new children into subgroups revealed various stages of assimilation; however, this study also showed how the newcomers' age, gender, and instrumental competencies that they had either acquired or possessed affected these processes and stages of assimilation. One important aspect of group dynamics among street children was found to be the idea of trust, expressed in the term "biswas," both in terms of genuine connections and as a rhetorical technique to strengthen what were ultimately brittle ties. Sociological theories have taken several approaches to the concept of trust, drawing from the writings of various experts. Numerous theories have underscored the significance of affect in comprehending trust. Others have drawn attention to the significance of instrumental aspects of trust, which can differ depending on the nature of incentives between the parties involved and can change from activity to activity. In this study, I emphasized the importance of understanding trust as a process reliant on the past, present, and future beliefs that street children had and how these influenced interactions with other stakeholders as well as with other street children, building on Georg Simmel's work on "trust."

Lastly, the difference between how rights-based policies are talked about and how they are actually put into place and run showed that paternalistic and welfare-based approaches to CISS interventions are still common, as Hanson's framework (Hanson 2012) goes into more detail. The difference that Amartya Sen (2009) draws between "niti" and "nyaya" was also evident in the ways that, even though CISS had access to institutional redressal channels, they were still denied substantive justice because of a general lack of political will and frail institutional frameworks.

Methodological:

I used a long-term qualitative research approach, as covered in depth in context 2. Although it is comparable to ethnography, the interactions I had with my respondent group prevented it from being considered traditional ethnography. Due to the larger group of homeless children's mobility,

their erratic schedules for daily activities, and the sporadic nature of our meetings, I was unable to conduct participant observations, which is an essential component of an anthropological method. What I did accomplish, though, was have more in-depth interactions with a smaller group of kids that I could see more regularly at regular intervals during my fieldwork. By adopting the mindset of a "street researcher," I was able to expand the scope of my fieldwork beyond Sealdah Station and its environs. I was also able to visit other locations that the children frequented, learn more about the other sporadic activities that CISS participated in, and even follow the children's lives after the cleaning campaign at Sealdah Station.

I collected data using a variety of methods, including non-participant observations, participatory play activities with CISS, interviews in various formats (from unstructured conversations with street children to semi-structured interviews with lower-level and senior functionaries in NGOs and government departments), and documents (publicly available, primarily from government and international NGOs, as well as other NGOs working with CISS in India and those explicitly shared by NGOs working with CISS in Kolkata) related to their work. The utilization of multiple data sources proved beneficial not only for triangulating and fortifying the validity of the emerging patterns that emerged from the data analysis but also for examining apparent contradictions between the CISS belief systems, practices, and imagination and the related NGO programs. Having access to resources to conduct a quantitative survey of the larger cohort of children would have likely strengthened the study further by allowing me to ask them questions about the various factors that led them to live on the streets as well as what opportunities and challenges they saw in their daily lives there.

Ultimately, the study presented a number of difficult and very subjective ethical conundrums. In the absence of the ability to guarantee the standard ethical codes of informed consent that research involving children often demands, I attempted to uphold a sense of wide ethical commitment to what the respondents chose to contribute and what they shared with my respondent group. This was accomplished by attempting to share in their daily happiness and grief outside of the set hours and days of my fieldwork, such as by joining in on a makeshift picnic the kids were having. The

more pressing problem was my inability to see any significant changes to the children's vulnerable circumstances during this study, even though I could maintain discretion in terms of anonymity and confidentiality of data regarding the non-normative (illegal) activities and practices the children were part of when writing my research. In the upcoming days, I intend to work with RIHAD to address this issue.

Policy:

Despite not falling under the purview of policy studies due to its methodological approach, this study yielded significant insights into the current state of CISS policies and programs in the Indian setting.

For starters, as we talked about in Context Five, government and non-governmental organization projects still follow the needs-based models of paternalism and welfare rather than emancipation or liberation when they try to solve problems related to CISS (Hanson 2012). Although there has been a general shift in the language on children's rights, CISS responses throughout the survey indicate that this may need to be interpreted in conjunction with an awareness of CISS's current capacities and agency. This would mean that more participatory methods would have to be incorporated into the CISS interventions at every turn, from program design and needs assessment to state and non-state actor implementation.

Secondly, building on the first point, the approaches and belief systems that form the foundation of the interventions with CISS did not appear to be in line with the creativity, abilities (social, physical, emotional, and instrumental), and ingrained mistrust, anxieties, and trauma that CISS deal with on a daily basis. This study demonstrates that in order to develop a multifaceted approach that can address the various issues that street children face, such as poverty, education, health, exploitation, abuse, stigmatization, and general social neglect, it is necessary to comprehend the nature of these children's everyday lives, including their life trajectories from source to destination. Many of the remarks expressed in General Comment No. 21 (2017) on Children in Street Situations (UNCRC 2017) are in line with this.

Thirdly, institutional approaches to education, career education, and life skills training need to be rethought. These are not divided into several pathways of varying quality that distinguish between various demographic segments according to available choices and quality. The Indian educational system currently employs this kind of segmentation. Policy papers, program approaches, and the caliber of institutions and initiatives provided to the wealthy and the underprivileged. Instead, what is required are "educational" pathways that are equitable for all segments of society starting at a young age, as well as methods that combine these pathways with the experiences and skills already possessed by marginalized child populations, all while providing equal opportunities for future employment.

CONCLUSION:

Ultimately, and perhaps most importantly, the study highlights—as have several other studies of this kind pertaining to the Indian context of children—the absence of political will and vision regarding the multiple childhoods that exist in the nation, particularly with regard to marginalized groups. This is then reflected in the institutional arrangements (such as CPCRs) for child care and protection, which, despite being established as separate statutory bodies with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, lack the funding, authority, and power necessary to carry out the functions that these institutions need and envision.

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