
Livelihood Strategies of Street children using the urban space: A case study at Sealdah Station Area, Kolkata

Sibnath Sarkar

Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, Nahata J. N. M. S. Mahavidyalaya, North 24 parganas, West Bengal, India.

Abstract

Social problems are existing in every developing country. In India, too there are several such problems. The problem of street children is one of them. No country or city anywhere in the world today is without the presence of street children, but the problem is most acute in developing countries. Thousands of street children are seen in our populous cities like Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi, and Chennai. Most of them are in the age group of 5-15 years. The number of street children is increasing gradually. Poverty, unemployment, rapid urbanization, rural-urban migrations are the root causes of street children. Being deprived from many of their family members, they have escaped to the street as a safe place for living. Street children are always related with the urban spaces in the developing world and it represents a sad outcome of the rapid urbanization process. After coming to the streets, these children have to cope with the new situation every day. They also adopt or develop many complex livelihood strategies and a variety of different informal or even illegal activities in public space and form supportive social networks in order to survive in street life. Street children use the different suitable urban spaces as their earning, living, entertaining spot. Therefore, the livelihoods of young people on the street should be analyzed in relation to the spaces they use, as well as their age and length of stay on the streets. This paper tries to explore the livelihood strategies and coping situation of street children in Sealdah station area. One hundred seventy five street living children are included in the study living in and around the railway station.

Key words: Street children, livelihood strategies, urban space.

Introduction

The issue of street children is considered as an urban problem. UNICEF and other agencies tend to define street children based on the frequency of their sleeping on the street and degree of contact they usually maintain with their families (Knaul, 1995). We can find some vagabond children on the railway station

complex, near the temples, in markets, under the bridges, near the bus stand etc. in Kolkata city area. Many of them are ill, all are helpless, and most of them are exposed to serious forms of exploitation. They have little or no ability to come out of the situation. Street children are those who have abandoned their homes, school, and immediate communities before

they are sixteen years of age, and have drifted into a nomadic street life.

The problem of street children is one of the burning social disturbances in many developing and developed countries. The UNICEF (2012) cites the incidence of a street population as an outcome of the inability of urban planning to accommodate the rapid inflow of people into a city. They constitute a marginalized population in most urban centers of the world. Poverty is the main cause for their migration from home (Bratter & Forrest, 1985). In addition, the breakdown of traditional family values, educational zeal, and community structure leaves a large number of children without necessary care and support for their sound growth and development. Among the developing countries of the world, India is home to the world's largest population of street children, estimated eighteen million (UNESCO Report, 2003). In India, the phenomenon of street children is an outcome of complex interplay of various factors. Rapid urbanization, migration, high rate of unemployment, rural urban migration, and increasing poverty results in increasing number of children on the streets. Like other metropolitan cities, Kolkata is also facing the difficulties related to street children. This paper tries to explore the lifestyle of street living children and analyses the different livelihood strategies adopted by them using the urban space. This geographical space is their place of work, sleep, recreation, as well as a place of simulative learning, socialization, and personal enrichment (Ennew & Swart-Kruger, 2003).

Objectives

The main objectives of the study is to find out the following—

- To identify the reasons behind the children being on the street;

- To find out the different livelihood strategies adopted by street children using the urban space;
- To indicate some remedial measures and suggestions for betterment of their life.

Methodology

This is a cross sectional qualitative study conducted the Sealdah railway station area (both north & south section) within ward 28, 36 and 37 of Kolkata Municipal Corporation of Kolkata district within the state of West Bengal. A sample of 253 street children aged between 6 to 18 years has been included in the study during the year 2015. Since it is hard to find street children due to their mobile nature, snowball-sampling method applied. The primary data obtained from a scheduled semi-structured questionnaire and after that, the data consequently analyzed.

Study Area

This study conducted in Sealdah Station, which is one of the major railway terminals of Kolkata metropolitan city. The study cover up the entire station area (North & South section), parking region and nearby market within ward no 28, 36, and 37 of Kolkata Municipal Corporation.

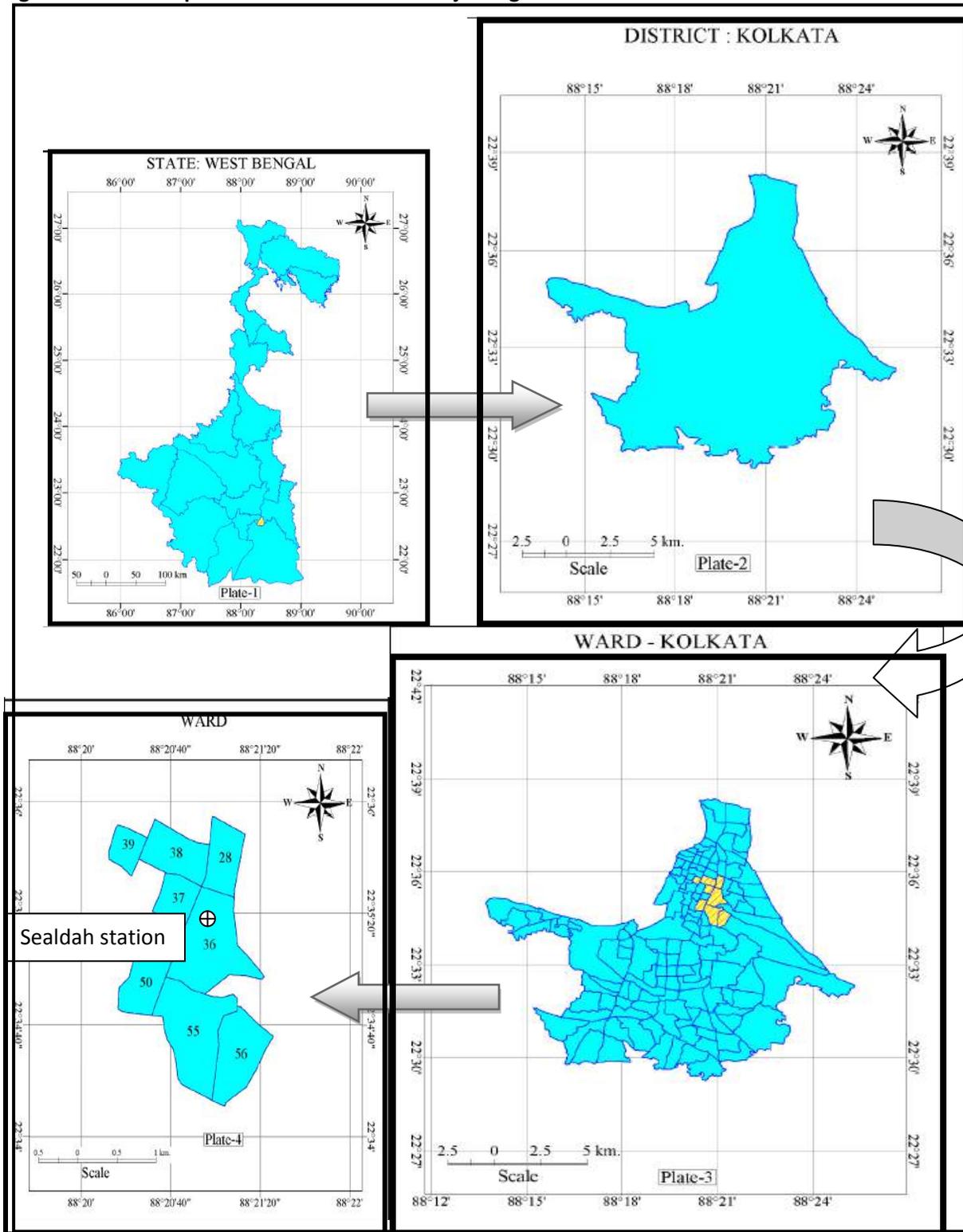
Hypothesis

The main hypothesis of the study are a) Street children migrate to gather in urban area for their survival; b) They use urban public space as their survival region; c) Street children adopt different livelihood strategies to cope up with the urban life.

Findings and Discussion

UNESCO (1997) deciphered the phenomenon of street children by identifying certain causes, which include rapid and uncontrolled urban

Fig. 1. Location Map of Sealdah Station And Adjoining Area.



Source: NATMO, 2015

Table 1. Causes of Migration from home to street life.

Causes of Migration	Number of street children	Percentage
Poverty	94	37.15
Family disharmony	48	18.97
Family violence and abuse	30	11.86
Negligence	21	8.30
Search of independence	23	9.09
Attraction of city life	18	7.13
Don't Know/ other causes	19	7.50

Source: Primary Survey, (2015)

Table 2. Use of urban space/station area for survival activities.

Activities	Use of space/station area	No. of children	Income /day
Rag pickers	Total station premises	119	Rs 100-200
Loading and unloading of goods	Station's platform	53	Rs 200-300
Shoe polishing	Parking area	18	Rs 200-300
Working at road-side stall	Nearby market	23	Rs 50-70
Working at veg. market	Near station	30	Rs 100-150
Others (begging, singing etc.)	Ticket-counter, running train	10	Rs 50-100

Source: primary survey, 2015

Table 3. Entertainment strategies adopted by the street children.

Strategies	Use of urban space	Distance from station	Specific area
Watching movies	Nearby cinema halls	Within 2 to 3 kms	Station adjoining areas
Gambling	Dilapidated areas	Within one km	Within station
Use of substances	Lonely places	Within one km	Within station
Going to red-lighted areas	Red-lighted areas	Within 2 to 3 kms	Station adjoining areas

Table 4. Causes of addiction by street children.

Daily problems faced by street children	Use of substances to combat the problems
Starvation	Reduce the pain of hunger
Anxiety in life	Helps to gather courage
Sleeplessness	Help to generate drowsiness
Communication with a newer group	Medium of communication
Tiredness	Supply energy to work
Lack of emotional care	Help to forget
Physical pain or injury	To habituate with the pain
Lack of entertainment or dull life	Add some excitement

Source: Primary observation by the researchers

Table 5. Addiction zone using the Urban Public space.

Addiction zone using the public space	Type of addiction	No of children	Time of addiction
In the upward areas of platform no 1	Glue sniffing, bidi, Khaini	8-12 street children	Whole day and night
Platform no 4A	Glue sniffing	4-6 aged children	Early morning, evening
Platform no 9, 9A, 9B, 9C	Glue sniffing, guthka, bidi etc.	8 -12 street children	Throughout the day, evening
Between North & south section of the station	Glue, biri, etc.	8-12 street children	Though the day and evening
Parking area of the station	Glue, bidi, ganja etc	So many children	Early morning and after sunset

Source: primary survey, 2015

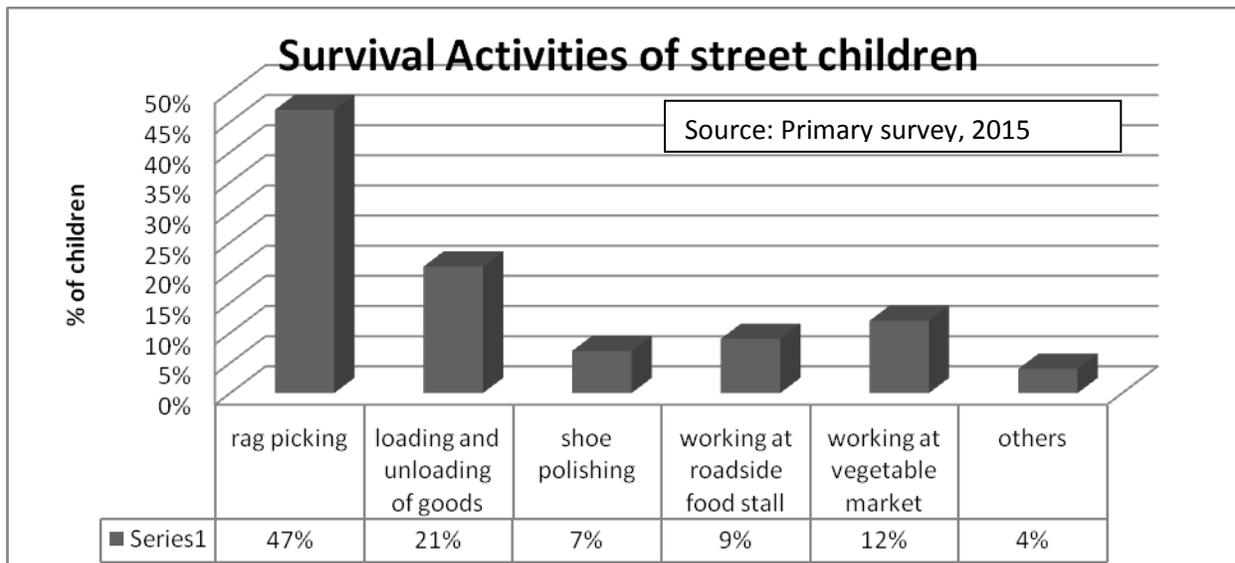


Fig. 2. Survival Activities of street children.

population explosion, family disintegration, and unemployment. Ghosh (1992) had mentioned that divorce of parents, death of one parent or both, separation from the parents, and broken family relations have a direct impact on children’s socialization. Even since the day of industrial revolution in Europe, the children found working, living, or loitering around in streets, cross roads, public parks, market places, and railway stations etc. Apparently, the root cause behind the occurrence of the problem of street children related with poverty. However if

we clearly look at the phenomenon, it goes beyond poverty. Often the combination of several phenomena gives rise to the problems of street children. The child on the street is the product of a chain of events beginning at the home (McLoyd, 1998). While on the one hand they are in the realm of poverty, sickness, and exploitation, on the other hand, they bear all these despite being innocent, lonely, and frightened young children. Rapid urbanization made changes in many societies. When families from rural areas migrated to cities,

infrastructural problems emerged due to increasing population and scarcity of space. That is why those families became the poorest segments of urban life. In India, the phenomenon of street children is an offshoot of complex interplay of various factors; the occurrence of street children seemed to have acquired a gigantic dimension in the wake of rapid industrialization and urbanization. The corresponding scenario in Kolkata's busy rail station area of Sealdah illustrated (Table 1).

The sample survey reveals that apart from poverty, domestic or family related problems, and the case of children whose parents either remarried/divorced/eloped or were addicted to alcohol, was also crucial. Personal freedom, the need for monetary independence, and the lure of the city were some other reasons for moving out of the home.

The destination of the street children is the Sealdah station area, but the place of residence/origin has a varied spatial extent as shown in figure no 1. A group that is at risk of ending up on the street is the migrant children. About one-tenth of the slum population in India is from West Bengal and Kolkata being the state capital with a high urban pull accounts for a large share of this population characterized by small-congested dwellings with limited infrastructure and with a large section of children, many of whom run away or are on the streets. Almost one-fifth (16%) of the children have come from the neighboring states of Bihar, Jharkhand and Odissa by rail route, a very few from across the border via again the rail route and sheltered themselves in Sealdah area.

Living Condition of the Children

After escaping from home, most of the children are under very poor conditions of living. The main characteristics of these children are that they live alone in streets and without

proper or reliable shelter (Lugala & Mbwambo, 1999). They prefer the Rail Station area of Sealdah for living because of ready availability of sources of water, shade, and different working opportunities. Street children are required to fend for themselves every moment of time. Research has shown that there are surprising similarities between the working activities carried out by street children all over the world, whether the economy is agriculturally or industrially based (Black, 1993). From my survey, it is learnt, that most of the children are engaged in different types of marginalized and unorganized activities to survive in their daily life. The children usually live in a harsh living environment with no scheduled time of bathing or eating. Children do not brush their teeth, cut their hair or nails, and wash their clothes regularly. Street children have remarkable survival instincts and boldness in daily struggle of street life (Verma, 1999).

Urban Livelihoods and Public Space

How the street children accomplish their basic needs using the public space in urban area is very critical. It helps researchers to understand how these children survive and enables him to find out the already existing resources they use in the study area. The public space of the city fulfils many different functions of the street children. It is their place of work, sleep, recreation, as well as a place of learning, socialization and personal enrichment (Ennew & Swart-Kruger, 2003). In order to know how these children manage their daily basic needs, researcher asked them how they got their food, where they slept at night, where they bathed, and the toilet facilities they avail and how they protect themselves. None of the children had fixed or permanent accommodation. More than 65% children slept in the station premises at night. Regular bathing, brushing teeth are not

very important to them. Majority of them have irregular bathing habit. They use railway station bathroom by paying two to five rupees. Often they use railway car-shed tap water for bathing, which usually used for cleaning of train. In terms of security most of the children said that they like better to live in a small group. This not only provides them with companionship but also comfort of security.

Working Strategies

Most of the Indian street children are working children. These working children are not only trained any vocational course, but also denied the education or any rehabilitation process that could enable them to escape the poverty trap. Like other parts of India, street children of Sealdah Station engage in different survival activities. Most of the children involve in waste material collection (like empty bottles, plastic packets, waste paper etc.). Other survival activities are shoe polishing, goods loading and unloading from trains, raw vegetables vending beside Koley market, begging, pick pocketing, helper in food stall etc. They use the station premises as their working zone. They also use public space as a means to assert their independent identities, identify, and appropriate different urban alcoves to use for survival and recreation (Beazley, 2003).

My study reveals that more than 47% of children are in the work of rag picking. These children use the station premises as their working area. They collect waste materials from trains and station surroundings garbage. All these collected material, sold at Narkeldanga khal pad area. Children are very much busy throughout the day but when the Special trains like Rajdhani, Duronto arrive, they become busier for collecting food, empty bottles, and other things. Despite the factors that have led to children being in the street, most of them

have begun their street life with an assumption that they could depend upon themselves and earn a living on their own. As the station area creates many unorganized job opportunities for children, many children of station area and outside gather here to grab the job opportunity for their survival.

Children usually teach one another how to earn a living, where to go for a living, and what to do in case they face problems, which is a clear manifestation of their subculture that come out as a result of their existence together on the street over an extended period of time and daily exposure to similar threats and circumstances. Most of the children interviewed also said that whatever they earn throughout the day have to spend within the day. They spend money on food, entertainment, or buying substances or drugs. They also mentioned that they have no safe place to keep their money, as it is too dangerous to walk or sleep with money on the streets. They fear that their money could easily steal, especially at night when they sleep.

Entertainment Strategies

Street children always try to indulge themselves for possible entertainment around their living areas. Interactions revealed that they usually enjoy the movies at opening days in nearby cinema halls. Sometimes they use substance like bidi, khaini and glue for entertaining themselves or made easier communication between friends or peer groups. They also involved in gambling within friends circle using the dilapidated places of the station area. Elder or senior street boys have the habit to move in red-light areas nearby Sealdah station.

Addiction and public space

Lack of parental care, emotional bonding, and guidance of the adults make them

frustrated and indulge them in the world of addiction. They often use the substances to cope up with the situation. Sniffing glue is one of the most common coping strategies among street children.

Street children use the different pocket areas of the station as their addiction zone. They usually prefer lonely scatter places for the purpose. They indulge in addiction activities mainly glue sniffing in a group of four to five member. They collect the substances from nearby market areas and use it throughout the day in and around the station site. The table below shows the addiction zones preferred by the street children.

Coping Strategies

In response to numerous odds and untidy life-style, many street children always try to adjust with the situation adopting different coping strategies for surviving in the urban space (Kellett & Moore, 2003). Street children do not operate chaotically in the urban environment. Different groups of children have different area to operate. This informal way of zoning areas of operation within the city limits competition for resources among the children give surety their survival. The children tend to follow the normal pulse of urban life. They usually wake up in the morning and spread in the streets in quest of their means of survival. Learning from the children knowledge, it revealed that their urban movements are strategic.

Conclusion and Remedial measures

The problems of street children are very much known everywhere both in developed and developing countries. Due to lack of permanent shelter and the fact that the number of street children is not recorded in any national survey or study, street children are often called the

'hidden children'. Being hidden, they are at a higher risk to being abused, exploited, and neglected. It is very clear from our study that an untidy urban environment, ignorance, abuse make them restless and rude, which sometime drive them to the world of addiction and other criminal activities. Involving in different survival activities, these children get neither any vocational training nor basic education. That forces them to confine within the trap of poverty. The street children are indeed a special group of children needing special protection because of their vulnerability. Some remedial measures can be taken to cope with the problem.

- They should be provided with different vocational trainings that will help them to establish themselves in future.
- Social concern and awareness rising is needed to fight the problems.
- The Government of India through decentralized planning should fully commit towards the meeting of Millennium Development Goal 1, which aims in eradicating extreme poverty and hunger - the root cause behind the phenomenon of street children. (Child line India Foundation,2014)

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