CONSTRUCTED CHILDHOOD:
A MICRO-SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF EVERYDAY LIVES OF STREET CHILDREN IN KOLKATA, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation engages with the everyday lives of homeless street children (hereafter, children in street situations, or CISS) in Sealdah Railway Station in Kolkata, West Bengal. The study was conducted over the period of five years (2014-2018) using a long-duration qualitative research approach with non-participant observations, informal discussions, participatory play activities, document analysis, and interviews with CISS and government and NGO functionaries. Aligning with a social constructivist paradigm that provides a critique of a universal normative understanding of childhoods, the study explores identity, stigma, street subculture, and intra-group and inter-group dynamics as evident from the lived experiences and belief systems everyday activities of CISS. The dissertation also explores the gaps in the perspectives of support and rehabilitation programmes for CISS and how CISS understand and respond to these from their own situated contexts.

The study traces the multitude of processes through which CISS negotiate their identity as 'outsiders' to reinforce and challenge ideas of normative childhood, and how they cope with the stigmatisation through different mechanisms of posturing, with gender-based differences. For CISS, the 'street' forms an essential element framing their subculture, with a sense of safety and security deriving more from performative gestures of friendship and solidarity with peers, and through surrogate families, while simultaneously rejecting the normative imagination of a 'sheltered life' as offering safety and security. Intra- and inter-group dynamics among CISS show the presence of strong leadership abilities, with male leaders using both instrumental and emotional competencies as a means of 'trust' to mediate these dynamics and maintain a group hierarchy that serves the needs of survival on the streets. Finally, the study analyses and unravels the gaps between the imagination and implementation of rehabilitation programmes for CISS among NGOs and lived realities of CISS to underline the inadequacy of current approaches, both in terms of perspectives and institutional arrangements.

Keywords: *homeless railway street children (CISS), identity, stigma, subculture, socialisation, trust, paternalism.*

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ACRONYMS

AC	Air-conditioned
BPL	Below Poverty Line
CINI	Child In Need Institute
CISS	Children in Street Situation
CPCR	Commission for Protection of Child Rights
CRPF	Central Reserved Police Force
CSSSC	Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta
DWCD	Department of Women and Child Development
F	Female
GRP	Government Railway Police
IEC	Information Education Communication
IIPM	Indian Institute of Planning and Management
INR	Indian rupee
J J Act	Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015
LSE	Life Skills Education
M	Male
N R S Hospital	Nil Ratan Sircar Medical College and Hospital, Kolkata
NCPCR	National Commission for Protection of Child Rights
NCT	National Capital Territory
NEP	National Education Policy 2020
NFE	Non-formal Education

NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPAC	National Plan of Action for Children (NPAC), 2016
OBC	Other Backward Classes
POCSO	Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012
RIHAD	Research Institute for Human and Agricultural Development, Kolkata
RPF	Railway Protection Force
RTE	Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act), 2009
SCPCR	State Commission for Protection of Child Rights
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEDGs	Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups
South 24 P	South 24 Parganas, a district in West Bengal
TA	Thematic Analysis
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VIP	Very Important Person

PART ONE

CONTEXT AND RESEARCH APPROACH

CHAPTER 1: RESEARCHING STREET CHILDREN

Introduction

This research study examines the everyday lives of homeless railway street children in street situations (or CISS[1] as referred to in this study) and questions related to the precariousness of these lives, with a specific focus on children who inhabit the railway station of Sealdah in the city of Kolkata in West Bengal. The everyday lives of street children are important as an area of research for several reasons. First, though street children form a part of our everyday urban world, and visibly so across different urban locations – urban street slums, urban garbage dumps, important crossroads, traffic signals, and railway platforms – policy interventions of both State and non-State actors seem to have achieved precious little in making them 'visible'. Variously classified among 'nowhere' children (Rustagi 2009) or among the 'invisibles' (Save the Children 2019), there is an absence of accurate official estimates of the magnitude or spread of the presence of street children across urban geographies in India. As noted by NGOs and researchers, definitional issues related to street children contribute significantly to such discrepancies. Second, children in street situations are exposed to high levels of insecurity, risk, violence, and exploitation in terms of their everyday lives. The associated vulnerabilities are multiple and call for policy interventions at different layers of the government and the participation of non-State actors where the government has been unable to provide for even the basic care and service facilities to address these multiple vulnerabilities.

However, even though CISS are identified among those 'vulnerable groups in need of care and protection'[2], the lack of accurate estimates, and relatedly, often the absence of identification documents for the street children, expose CISS to a precarious everyday existence along multiple dimensions: child labour; child trafficking; child abuse and exploitation; access to education; access to government welfare schemes; access to health services; and access to adequate legal

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[1] The study focuses mainly on homeless railway street children. However, I use the acronym CISS, street children, homeless street children interchangeably across the dissertation; except when specific mention is made otherwise.
[2] Under Section 1 (14) of Juvenile Justice (Care & Protection of Children) Act 2015, a child in need of care and protection includes, among other categories, a child 'who is found without any home or settled place or abode and without any ostensible means of subsistence' or those 'living on the street'.

remedies and redressal for the absence of and violation of basic entitlements granted in international child rights treaties and even national-level rights-based mandates for children. Third, the population's response at large to street children, in terms of their own everyday lives, mirrors the ambivalence we see about this vulnerable group from the State. As I witnessed during my fieldwork in Sealdah, most regular commuters identified the CISS on the railway platform and in and around the station as '*anath*' (orphans) or '*chor-chhyanchor*' (thief).[3] Many commuters, when questioned, revealed sympathy for the children but without expressing any specific concerns about the vulnerabilities and violence, these children could be exposed to. For example, a middle-aged male commuter who travels for work from the outskirts of the city to Kolkata said, "As parents of these children have died, they are helpless. They are very poor. Whenever I see them, I feel sad for them." Other commuters seemed to be less sympathetic. A young female student shared, "There is no guarantee whether these children have parents or not and who they might be. They act to draw sympathy. But they do pickpocketing. If you try to show sympathy, they will take advantage." Thus, regular commuters and citizens who encounter street children throughout their everyday urban lives had varied responses to the predicament of these children. But even these responses were inclined to make invisible the precarious lives of street children, and at best, were only in the form of a distant show of sympathy without acknowledging the multiple disadvantages and insecurities these children were exposed to routinely.

My initial interest and engagement with CISS were in the capacity of a member of a non-government organisation (NGO) working on this issue. During this work, I noticed some prominent differences between children living on the streets with their families and those children who were homeless and without families. The former group did come under the ambit of programmes and schemes for street children that NGOs working in the larger domain of CISS were engaged in. This was probably because this group was easier to locate and 'quantify' in terms of programme outreach and access, thus providing NGOs with easier monitoring and donor interactions. In contrast, children living on the streets without families, though significant in terms of numbers, did not easily allow for such opportunities of programmatic delimitation and access due to their constant mobile nature. Moreover, there also seemed to be a difference in the perceptions of the NGOs regarding the relative benefits of developing and implementing

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[3] The Bengali transliterations are done by me to match the spoken language as closely as possible; no specific transliteration protocol has been followed.

programmes for the former group as compared to the latter; the former was perceived to be more amenable to rehabilitation and social integration initiatives as compared to the latter who were regarded as "*bos mane na / baage aana jae na*" (cannot be managed/tamed). However, my own experience revealed the more precarious nature of the lives of homeless street children who were without families, was constantly mobile, and inhabited spaces in and around the city railway stations. Against this backdrop, I started researching street children during my M. Phil programme and decided to explore this further through my doctoral programme.

Context of CISS

Across the world, street children have historically occupied a peculiar space in the imagination of the State and society at large. While identified using different terminology across different countries, it is clear that street children are considered a category different from 'children' and often have less than human qualities. For example, street children are referred to as '*chapulines*' (meaning parasitic creatures) in Costa Rica, '*bui doi*' (meaning dust of life) in Vietnam, and '*tokai*' (meaning garbage collector) in Bangladesh (Dabir and Athale 2011). Many factors, including age, gender, geographical location, livelihood, migration, slum displacement, poverty, and lack of shelter, have been observed to contribute to and shape the realities of street children in different contexts (de Benítez 2007; 2011). This has also created contested meanings and definitions for street children among researchers, policymakers, and civil society organisations. However, broadly, two specific features seem to be associated with various definitions of street children: (1) presence on the street; (2) presence/absence of family.

When we examine the United Nations' definition of street children, we find that it suggests that CISS may be a wide category of nearly homeless children who have no direct supervision from adults: 'street children are those for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, i.e. unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) more than their family has become their real home, a situation in which there is no protection, supervision, or direction from responsible adults' (Dabir and Athale 2011: 6). Policymakers and civil society organisations mostly follow the definition provided by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) (1986) that distinguishes children *on* the streets and children *of* the streets. The former has some family support

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and connections, live at home (primarily shacks), might even attend school, but mostly live on the street throughout the day. On the other hand, children *of* the streets might have some family connections, but for them a sense of family derives more from companions on the street, and they also spend most of the day and night on the street. This group includes abandoned children, orphans, and runaway children totally disconnected from their biological families. Definitions by such international agencies and policymakers tend to overlook the specific differences between street children in terms of geographical, historical, social, and cultural contexts that often differ widely across the globe, including within the Global North and the Global South.

However, the social science literature around street children has primarily emphasised the different set of conditions and factors that are seen to underlie the question 'why are these children on the streets?' in developing definitions and typologies of street children. For example, Lusk (1992), in his work with street children in Rio de Janeiro, developed four categories of children found in the street (family-based street workers, independent street workers, children *of* the streets and children of street families), with each having its own socio-psychological characteristics. Both macro-level structural reasons such as poverty, absence of adequate livelihood opportunities, migration, and social exclusion, and micro-level factors related to degenerate and abusive family conditions, the prevalence of alcoholism and substance abuse, anomalous reproductive behaviour, deviant lifestyle choices, and non-normative subculture are cited in such studies across the globe (see Dabir and Athale 2011: 29-47; de Benítez 2011: 21-36).

These studies provide accurate empirical descriptions and illustrate the causes behind both the diverse trajectories that CISS have from home situations to the street and the multiple vulnerabilities that CISS have to encounter in their everyday lives on the street. Additionally, the studies also draw the attention of the State and non-State actors and policymakers to different intervention possibilities to improve the life situations of CISS. However, at the same time, the descriptions and analyses in these studies strongly reflect discourses of morality, deficiency, and a deviation from what is normatively acceptable in society at large, particularly in the portrayals of sexual behaviour and petty crime among street children. Aptekar and Stoecklin (2014) note that this normative idea derives from a historically oppositional relationship between roaming and homebound lifestyles. As aptly analysed by De Moura (2002: 359),

> …this construction represents more than just a description of social phenomenon. The creation of a scheme to explain street children, a characterisation of individuals and their families which draws heavily on moral values and the conception of an isolated and alienated street society, has important implications. It stigmatises poor families and children on the street and helps to perpetuate their social exclusion.

More recent literature, mainly culturally situated ethnographies, has, however, been able to transcend such an acontextual normative position and has traced the diverse moral, conceptual, and cultural registers through which the everyday lived realities of CISS can be understood (e.g., Hecht 1998; Kovats-Bernat 2006; Davies 2008). In this regard, Sarada Balagopalan's authoritative ethnographic work with street children in Calcutta (Kolkata) can be seen to be aligned to the same strand and seminal in the Indian context (Balagopalan 2014).

In the Indian context, urban street children, though a common sight across several cities for a long time, has been an issue of policy interest only in recent decades. One of the main reasons for this is the lack of reliable estimates of their numbers and spread across and within the urban centres. CISS does not form a part of any national-level surveys, and the figures offered as estimates come from different individual studies. These estimates vary widely, even when the studies are more or less concurrent (Save the Children 2019: 15).

In the next section, I examine this issue concerning the definitional problems that have been there with CISS and noted in the literature.

Definitional Problems with Respect to CISS

It is difficult to draw a clear and exhaustive definitional boundary around the population discussed in this thesis, and a close examination of the existing definitions merely reveals the particular social construction within which street children are being situated. This tends to CISS either becoming black-boxed, or invisible or uncritically normalised when operationalised into statistical categories.

Henry Mayhew first used the term 'street children' in 1851 in his book *London Labour and the London Poor* (as cited in Dabir 2014). Colloquially these children are referred to as distinct groups of homeless, runaway, street-living and street-working children who are generally associated with delinquency or negative connotations. Due to the multiple identities, realities and reasons for being on the street, and the degree of their relation to the street, defining street children has become a problematic issue.

The term street child was first introduced in global policy discourse by UNICEF, following the UN International Year of the Child in 1979, to address the phenomenon of a group of children working in the streets, mostly in the developing world. One of the most cited definitions by UNICEF reads, "…any girl or boy... for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood; and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults" (de Benítez 2011). Interestingly, even in empirical research studies, street children have defined themselves as unaccompanied children working or living in the streets who do not have an adult to take care of them, no place to live and sleep where they want (Aptekar & Stoecklin 2014: 8).

Circumstantial evidence from different studies suggest that all street children do not have similar family circumstances and, therefore, their time on the streets varied. The children who did not go home at night were 'street children of the street', while the ones who returned home at night to their families were called 'children on the streets' (Aptekar & Stoecklin 2014). As discussed earlier, this understanding has gained acceptance in UNICEF's '*on*' and '*of*' the street categories. With new situations adding to the number of children on the streets, the complexity of defining street children has further deepened. The different types of attachment to the families, ranging from returning every night after work on the street to home/families living on streets, to occasionally visiting families in remote locations, creates a diversity of lived experience for the street children, and grouping them in the UNICEF prescribed categories has also been problematic.

Another definitional conflict arises on the moral framing of CISS, that is, whether they are to be treated as aggressors or victims. For instance, while the popular (middle class) usage 'street children', or a punitive or law enforcement framing like 'children in conflict with law', has

connotations of delinquency, civil society groups like UNICEF, Save the Children, and Every Child views them from the perspective of 'victims' that require a prevention and response strategy.

The UNHRC resolution of 2011 adopts a safe approach and refers to street children as 'children working and/or living on the street' (Dabir 2014). But a significant critique of the definitions that depend on children's presence on the streets and their varying degree of relation to family is the total disregard for the street situation and the emotional attachment that the children have with the public spaces. In response to this, Lucchini (2007) has proposed a model called the Child-Street System (CSS), which can capture the diversity of relationships that different children may have depending on the child's experience of street life (see Aptekar & Stoecklin 2014). Similarly, another scholar has used a slight variation, identifying them as Street Connected Children, who can be understood as "children for whom the street has become a central reference point, playing a significant role in their everyday lives and identities" (Meincke 2011, as cited in Dabir 2014). The positive aspect of these definitions is that each child is recognised as a social actor contributing to creating her or his own identity. Still, at the same time, these definitions bear the risk of devaluing knowledge of the children's shared experiences.

However, with the advent of the rights-based approach, the latest drive has been to collectivise 'street' children into the more significant phenomenon of mobile youngsters under the collective banner 'children on the move'. But we need to be aware that this also generates the fear of missing out on experiences of specific cohorts of such children, leading to gaps in the policies addressing the specific needs these cohorts would require (de Benítez 2011). In my work, which focuses particularly on homeless street children in a railway station, I find it apt to align more with Aptekar and Stoecklin (2014), who refers to 'children in street situations' (CISS), underlining the context of the street (distinct from other urban experiences) as shaping the child's condition/behaviour, so as not to individualise the child's coping strategies.

Different Types of Vulnerabilities CISS Encounter

Street children have universally been perceived as 'victims' and thus are more likely to be treated as passive objects needing a welfarist approach. On the other hand, they are also perceived as

'delinquents' who are likely to be feared, excluded and subjected to random abuse and state-led violence, in most of the cases ending up in the penal system. In the imagination of the larger society, younger children are perceived more as victims, while with age and the advent of youth, this perception transforms into one of delinquency (de Benítez 2011). However, finally, a deeper understanding of how street children interact with various environments is key to understanding their vulnerabilities.

The UN Human Rights Council recognises the vulnerable nature of street children in its 2011 (UNHRC 2011; as cited in Dabir 2014: 10) resolution:

> the violations and abuses of the rights of children living and/or working on the street, including discrimination and stigmatisation and lack of access to basic services, including education and basic health care, and all forms of violence, abuse, maltreatment, neglect or negligent treatment experienced by them, such as exploitation, gender-based violence, trafficking, forced begging and hazardous work, forced recruitment by armed forces and armed groups, forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

The foremost concern of street children is the absence of their biological family or a normative family. The normative care and protection of the family are therefore absent. Most street children are away from home due to poverty, abuse, violence, and so on (Aptekar & Stoecklin 2014). For the children pushed out of their homes due to poverty, being on the street is one way of coping with poverty or financial hardships at home and gaining access to other income-generating sources. This situation demands mobility across occupations and geographical locations, and so they move on and off the streets depending upon the job situation and opportunities for survival (de Benítez 2011). The need to fend for themselves often lead CISS to hazardous jobs and illegal activities such as theft (from pickpocketing to robbery), gambling, sex work (prostitution, sex tourism, pornography), dealing in contraband (including selling alcohol, drug trafficking, smuggling, and participating in illegal currency exchange); they may be involved in illicit activities on their own or as members of street gangs (Dabir 2014). This makes them susceptible to the law enforcement system, and often, the lack of legal recourse makes them all the more vulnerable.

The traumatising experience of violence and abuse (physical and sexual) that the street children bear from their past also render them psychologically unwell. High incidence of mental

disorders, depression, suicidal thoughts are common in street children. Such children display a deep sense of self-hatred, which renders them highly vulnerable, more so in the absence of any proper support system. The trauma often heightens emotions that are difficult to control. Many are likely to use drugs to reduce pain. Therefore, street children are prone to substance abuse and early sexual activity, particularly children '*of*' the street – who also typically have had less or no contact with their families and have spent more time on the streets than street-working children (i.e., children '*on*' the street). In the case of girls, the vulnerability to sexual abuse is much more when compared to boys (de Benítez 2011).

Many of these children end up dying on the pavements as victims of drug abuse, gang rivalry, rape, and disease (Dabir 2014). Thus, death rates amongst street children are high across different geographical regions. Again, the children are exposed to the increasing street-connected child problems across regions through intercountry trafficking of humans and drugs, civil conflict and war, the movement of refugees, and economic or other migration (de Benítez 2011).

The normative assumption of a home in terms of material aspects of having a roof over their heads, and one that includes social relationships that the children can rely on, is missing in the life of the street children, and it renders them highly vulnerable in terms of safety and protection. Therefore, street children rely on social and emotional relationships, mostly with peers as 'home' for them (Aptekar & Stoecklin 2014).

Models of Interventions with CISS

The Council of Europe in 1994 was the first institutional body to categorise the policy approaches evident in state practises towards street children as: repression-oriented, protection-oriented and human rights-based. A slightly different classification was proposed for Latin America: correctional model; rehabilitative; outreach strategies; and preventive approach (de Benítez 2011). Over the decades, a significant shift from welfare-based to rights-based approach in the domain of working with children has led to street children not being viewed anymore as passive subjects of welfare benefits but rather as the possessor of rights. This includes the idea of treating them as active participants in every action associated with their lives, such as designing policies,

implementing programs, conducting research related to them by listening to their perspectives, understanding their real-life experiences, and focusing on the realisation of their rights. The many positive experiences and reflections from their lives imply that street children do not always need rescue but need protection from risks of abuse and exploitation.

The report by UNHR (2012) on 'Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Street Living and/or Working Children' acknowledges that developing a comprehensive child protection system by national governments as well as other agencies and professionals is essential, and it places a range of recommendations on the same. Both the recommendations of UNCRC and UNHR and guidelines for the State and non-State actors are supposed to be taken into account for intervention models designed by these actors for street children. However, there is a varying degree of commitment from both State and non-State actors across the globe.

States are inclined towards framing policies and programmes for street children where the primary responsibility for implementation if often vested with non-State actors. Therefore, non-State actors, mainly NGOs, provide direct support services as well as research and advocacy related to CISS. Positive findings from this body of research and participatory ways of mapping the needs of street children have come to define the current norms for NGOs working with vulnerable children, including CISS (de Benítez 2011). Many agencies across the world offer specialised interventions through personalised support adhering to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR 2012) criteria for good practices, such as (1) best interest, (2) non-discrimination, (3) participation, and (4) accountability. Some of the most common programmatic interventions include drop-in centres, open shelters, outreach programmes at Railway stations and other public places, home placements for foster care, group homes or transition houses, child helpline and rescue, treatment, and counselling for victims of sex abuse and exploitation. Broadly, current interventions can be grouped under rights-based activism in which the street children display agency and voice their lived realities for claiming their rights and sensitising others.

Literature Review and Theoretical Interventions

This section outlines two broad strands of literature this dissertation engages with. First, the study of children and childhoods, and second, specific social science theories that have been generally used to examine the nature of the interaction between street children and their environments.

In the former, universal theories of developmental psychology, with the idea that there is an 'essential' nature of childhood arranged in specific normative stages and that this forms a separate period of the life cycle of human beings, has been dominant over the more significant part of the 20th century. In parallel, and since the mid-20th century, other social science theories from sociologists, anthropologists and cultural psychologists have started questioning such universal theories and postulated cultural diversity and socialisation as critical contextual factors that contribute to variability in the development of children and their childhoods across geographies (Menon and Saraswathi 2018). More recently, a 'new paradigm of childhood sociology' is said to have emerged with the work of James and Prout (1997). This work drew upon Philippe Aries' work to underplay the role of adults in the socialisation of children and underlined the agency of children in the construction of their own social lives (as cited in Balagopalan 2014: 12). As Balagopalan (2014: 12) perceptively notes,

> This recalibration of childhood within the new discipline of childhood studies through the framing of 'multiple childhoods' produced research that over the years denaturalised the assumed universality of concepts like biological age, adult–child differentiation, notions of childcare and children's work and the affective investments that adults make in children.

Another significant contribution of this new paradigm of 'multiple childhoods' has been methodological, where more interpretive frameworks have replaced earlier positivist approaches.

Though this new paradigm of 'multiple childhoods' has brought a focus on the influence of culture, everyday lived realities of children in different contexts, and children's agency, scholars have observed how even such conceptualisations are related to a specific normative understanding of childhood and children, example children's needs (Jenks 2005), or an understanding of culture as disconnected from other social realms, example role of the State and the Market (Balagopalan 2014).

Balagopalan's (2014) own ethnographic work, drawing on the daily practices of street children in Calcutta in the 1990s, seeks to address these concerns by exploring the contradictory pulls and pressures of different ideas of childhood. These include the tension between 'labour' and 'education', and between 'rights', as emerging from a rights-based discourse, and 'responsibility, as experienced by children in their everyday lives, and a critical evaluation of these tensions through a historical lens.

My research aligns with the thrust of the 'multiple childhoods' paradigm in ways similar to that of Balagopalan. The study foregrounds CISS's meaning-making processes in their own specific urban cultural context through an interpretive methodology. The research uses field-level data from prolonged qualitative fieldwork in specific environments frequented by the specific street children group that was studied. However, at the same time, the study remains aware of the main critiques of the 'multiple childhoods' paradigm. First, there have been critiques of this paradigm as being an 'elite discourse'; that is, while providing for multiple meaning-systems of the lives of children, it simultaneously downplays ways of understanding children in purportedly essentialist ways and claims a privileged point of view that supposedly has access to and can represent voices of the marginalised (Cook 2009). Second, and in a way related to the former critique, the paradigm seems to also devalue the role of policies and policymakers as assuming 'essentialist' positions As Menon and Saraswathi (2018: 9) note, "While the arguments presented (…) about the multiplicity of childhoods is compelling, it is difficult for many – especially policy-makers and activists – to act in a vacuum of shared understandings about children and childhoods." The current study addresses this squarely by closely examining the role of policies and policymakers and emphasises the need for such a lens from a substantive theory of justice (Sen 2009). In addition to agentic dimensions of children's everyday lives, the study also stresses the significance of structural violence and the role of State and non-State actors that work out in contradictory ways in the everyday lives of CISS. Here, 'structural violence' is "understood as patterns of differences within large-scale social structures – differences of power, wealth, privilege, education and health – that are unjust and unequal. [More importantly] this form of violence also occurs in a society if institutions and policies are designed in a way that creates barriers or inequitable access to a range of goods and services for some people but not others" (UNICEF 2018: 2).

The second strand of literature that the study engages with includes a range of social science theories that have examined how the everyday lives and the lived reality of the childhood of CISS is heavily shaped by the perception of the larger society and their subsequent stigmatisation. First, taking a cue from a psychological perspective, the cognitive dissonance theory focuses on beliefs that are in constant tension with the actual behavioural patterns of individuals. Coined by American sociologist Leon Festinger, in the case of CISS, society's attitudes of what CISS should be ideally doing as children conflict with the witnessed lived reality of these children. The lack of synchronisation between the beliefs and behaviour leads to 'psychological tension', which is sought to be resolved through different explanations for the children's behaviour and redressal mechanisms to generate behaviour appropriate to children (Aptekar and Stoecklin 2014:108). For instance, for an onlooker on the street, the belief that a child is innocent and in need of protection is opposed to the view that a child can produce their livelihood. Therefore, from a psychological standpoint, it is more likely for the people to grant CISS the status of 'children' than to change their understanding of childhood.

Another such theory, the rational choice theory, delineates that each action taken by an individual needs to be viewed as a consequence of a previous action that was beneficial to them. Relying on a utilitarian belief, the rational choice theory states that since all the information required to make a rational choice is not always available to the actor, people make choices to meet their immediate needs, which is defined as 'rational choice'. While applying the rational choice theory to CISS, it has been argued that while the decision to live on the streets might not be the ideal choice, in the case of an abusive household or as a motivation to earn due to poverty at home, the decision to live on the streets might be the most optimum choice for CISS given the existing information bias (e.g., Veale 1992). Though researchers have not used such an idea of choice to indicate 'empowerment' of CISS and have used ideas such as 'tactical agency' or 'thin agency' to outline the adverse conditions within which such 'choices' are made (Bordonaro 2012), the overall direction of their arguments has often adopted a rational choice approach (e.g., Evans 2004).

On the other hand, the functionalist approach has approached the issue of CISS as being an aberration that needs to be corrected through proper socialisation into ways of behaviour that can be deemed as a routine and predictable for the coherent functioning of society at large. This is

most evident in early empirical studies analyses of street children in Latin America, studies which then regarded welfare solutions imposed on these children as a means of social integration (Panter-Brick 2002). Though coming from different analytical perspectives, a critique of the functionalist position is found in the works of both the social theorists Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu (Lucchini and Stoecklin 2020: 19-21). Giddens' theory of structuration underlines that social structures come about only through the continuously reproduced actions and activities of social actors with specific interests. On the other hand, though emphasising the role and agency of social actors, Bourdieu limits this to the types of assets (economic, social, cultural, symbolic) available to these actors. While Bourdieu's idea of social reproduction has not been used much in studies on CISS, I find his concept of 'symbolic violence' relevant for my work to understand how such violence is normalised in the everyday lives of CISS and how a sense of agency is also visible in how CISS negotiate such violence. For Bourdieu (Burawoy 2019), symbolic violence refers to the processes through which asymmetrical relationships of power between the more powerful and less powerful are internalised by the latter. In the case of street children, we see such a sense of violence in the labelling and stigmatisation of street children and the ways in which, thereby, CISS represent themselves.

What is evident in recent works from both the strands of literature, despite differences in perspectives and emphasis that underlie theories of children and childhoods on the one hand, and social science theories through which the issues around street children have been specifically examined on the other hand, is the assumption of social constructivism. This allows for exploring both the issue of structure (questions of power) and agency (means of resistance/subversion). Aligning with this approach, I extend my research to a critical examination of the nature of welfare interventions by State and non-State actors without devaluing the role of such interventions, as is often visible in work from the Global South that has adopted a postcolonial social constructivism analytical approach (Menon and Saraswathi 2018).

Key Research Questions

The current study seeks answers to the following three key research questions:

1. How are the individual and collective identities of homeless street children in Sealdah constructed? How do the children negotiate their ever-present label as 'less than normal children'? What defines the subculture of these so-called deviant and marginal urban groups?

2. What dynamics can be observed within and between sub-groups of CISS, and what role do these processes play in fulfilling basic material and emotional needs among CISS?

3. How do the State and NGOs make their presence felt within the everyday lives of CISS in Sealdah? How do the ideas, imagination, and programmes for rehabilitation of CISS by these entities align with and deviate from the lived realities of CISS?

While I happened to have some broad directions for my research when I started work on my dissertation, the key research questions were developed in an iterative process as I engaged with the literature around CISS and started my fieldwork in Sealdah Railway Station. From both the strands of existing literature that I engaged with more deeply and the patterns that I could decipher from an analysis of the data from my fieldwork, the following conceptual issues were identified as important for my study: identity, stigma, subculture, solidarity, trust, and rights-based models of intervention with CISS.

Literature Review: Research Methodology

At a broad level, two strands of methodological directions can be identified when examining issues around street children in the literature (de Benítez 2011; Aptekar & Stoecklin 2014; Lucchini and Stoecklin 2020). One is a body of research that focuses on the generation of *knowledge for action*, mainly in terms of policy and programme design initiatives, which can improve conditions of street children. The other can be located in academic scholarship in the social sciences, and that is guided more by the objective of *knowledge for understanding*. Though these two strands often tend to overlap and have similar underlying concerns, there are also significant disconnects between the two. As de Benítez (2011) observes the two strands of research do not speak to each other at many

levels. Disciplinary academic research on street children in sociology, anthropology, and geography is often conducted within narrow disciplinary boundaries and seldom provides policy or interventional insights. In terms of approaches to data collection, the policy strand is more oriented towards quantitative data collection methods such as quantitative surveys, while the social sciences disciplinary strand more often uses qualitative techniques, including ethnography and participatory methods of data collection with street children. In terms of the broader objective of each strand, the policy strand is focused more on the estimation of numbers and characteristics of the population or sample being studied, while the social sciences strand is directed towards exploration of experiences, aspirations, and everyday lives of street children. In this section, I briefly review some of the important features in both the strands.

A significant portion of the early literature around street children comes from Brazil, with studies that offered estimates of street children in the 1980s and early 1990s being shown to be grossly erroneous later (see de Benítez 2011: 4). The earlier guesstimates and word-of-mouth citations were noted to be much less in observational headcount surveys of the mid-1990s. However, as observed by researchers, the over-inflated figures probably served to emphasise the scale of the problem and helped in fundraising by NGOs, both national and international (see, de Benítez 2011: 5; Aptekar and Stoecklin 2014: 122).

Studies since the 1990s have been more careful about methodology, and the use of 'situation analysis' to focus on city-specific observational headcounts have yielded more reliable estimates of street children. Observational headcounts involve a simple count of visible children on the streets by the surveyors, and this is also often accompanied with reliability checks by cross-validation using a second count by a distinct group of surveyors and a third and final count based on the observations from the first two counts (Barry 2019; de Benítez 2011; Aptekar and Stoecklin 2014). Though the observational headcount has provided more reliable estimates, the challenges of this approach include the inability to cover children who are more difficult to access or out-of-sight for different reasons and to appropriately judge and include children within definitional categories based on observation alone.

Policy studies related to CISS have also used the method of respondent-driven sampling, an approach often used for difficult-to-reach population groups (e.g., Dhawan et al. 2019). More

akin to snowball sampling, in this approach, a few 'seed' children from the defined category are chosen to recruit similar children through their connections in the same or similar networks. Respondent-driven sampling does not provide accurate estimates of CISS but serves as an effective approach to understand the characteristics of samples of CISS being studied. The feature of incentivised recruitment of seed children and other children for the study, used in this approach, has been criticised from the point of view of research ethics, and the inclination of seed children to choose children more often from in-groups has been criticised for possible bias in the sample.

Another methodology used to estimate difficult-to-reach population groups, though relatively less used with human populations, has also been used in more recent studies with CISS; this is the capture-recapture method adapted from wildlife studies (e.g., Bezerra et al. 2011). A simple version of this method involves tagging and marking a sample of CISS (say, S1) from a delimited geography and then again selecting another sample (S2) from the same geography to see how many of the second sample had been marked (R); the estimated unknown population size is calculated as (S1 X S2)/R.

The broader social science approach, on the other hand, has differed paradigmatically from the above strand. While there are variations within this broad approach, it can be characterised by qualitative methods ranging from case studies to ethnographic studies (de Benítez 2011). Even policy-type survey studies on street children across larger geographies, often an entire city or multiple cities, add a component of standard qualitative data collection methods such as semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions with small samples from the surveyed population.

In summary, the former is focused more on the estimation of numbers and characteristics of the population/sample being studied while the latter is directed more towards exploring experiences, aspirations, and everyday lives of CISS.

Outline of the Chapters

This dissertation is organised into three sections. Part One has two chapters that introduce the motivations behind the study and the theoretical and methodological concerns behind the study, as well as the key research questions.

Chapter One focuses on the main issues around CISS that motivated my study from my earlier days of work in NGOs, many of which have remained unchanged and unaddressed over the years. It also lays out the context of the challenges that different stakeholders have faced in engaging with these issues and bringing about sustainable change in the everyday lives of CISS, definitional issues and problems of estimation being the most important of these. Theoretical and methodological issues as can be seen from both policy literature broadly and other social science disciplinary areas are then reviewed. Chapter One also presents my key research questions.

The next chapter (Chapter Two) focuses on the methodological part of the study. It outlines how my methodological approach, long-duration qualitative in nature, is located vis-à-vis quantitative and qualitative methods used in other studies with CISS. The chapter describes my fieldwork site and how it extended beyond Sealdah Railway Station and the changes around the primary field site over the period of my research. I also share details about the data collection methods and analysis, and ethical issues related to the study, in this chapter.

Part Two of the dissertation has three chapters, each focusing on one of my key research questions. Chapter Three engages with the question of how CISS construct, perform and negotiate a new set of identities after leaving their homes, and in the face of stigmatisation of being 'deviant', 'children of the street', and 'untrustworthy' from other stakeholders. The chapter also deals with the nature of subculture built around the different ways of being of CISS on the streets, including the significant role the street itself plays as a space of freedom and security for CISS.

Chapter Four deals with the processes through which in-group and out-group solidarities play out in the everyday lives of CISS and the role such processes play in an understanding of solidarity and trust among CISS. The role of different group members and group processes in maintaining group solidarity and a processual understanding of trust that such in-group workings

can be mapped onto, instead of a functional or deterministic understanding of trust, is also examined.

The last chapter in this section (Chapter Five) analyses the legal and institutional apparatus that is supposed to be behind models of rehabilitation work with CISS. The contradictions that result from different imaginations, beliefs and practises of these models of intervention of NGOs and the government, and those of CISS, are examined through fieldwork details related to NGO programmes in the area of education and vocational skills.

The concluding chapter (Chapter Six) forms Part Three of the thesis. This chapter outlines the study's main findings and provides details of the study's conceptual, methodological, and policy-related contributions. The chapter also lists out areas for further research.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY AS A STREET RESEARCHER

Introduction

The earlier chapter outlined the motivations for this research, the key research questions, and the critical issues — theoretical and empirical, guiding the inquiry into these research questions. This chapter deals with the directions related to research design and methodology that shaped this study. The data collection for the study, within the context of my doctoral dissertation component, was over four years (2014 to 2018). However, in a way, my engagement with the issues around CISS, which motivated my doctoral work, and even my pre-doctoral M. Phil Thesis, has a longer history.

I had earlier worked with the Child In Need Institute (CINI) in Kolkata for four years. I primarily dealt with funding agencies, monitored specific programmes for deprived children and developed project proposals. In this functional office-based role, I did not get much opportunity to be in the field or directly interact with the disadvantaged children we worked with. However, through the reports that I got to consolidate, and what I heard from my colleagues, I started developing an interest and curiosity about the lives of disadvantaged children in urban settings.

Thereafter, I also worked with a social initiative of the Indian Institute of Planning and Management (IIPM) in Kolkata for two years. There I was responsible for monitoring projects that were implemented with disadvantaged children in sites in Kolkata and then reporting the project updates to the head office. However, here also I did not have much direct access to the children. The projects and their implementation left me with more questions than answers about the changes these projects could bring into the conditions of urban disadvantaged children.

During this work, and consultancies with NGOs, I slowly started more direct interactions with street children, both as part of my work and more because of my interest and concern about their precarious life situations. I realised that the everyday lives of children living on the streets are distinct from other urban disadvantaged children living in slums or ghettos. There were quite a few of these children I started coming across, living on the streets without a family, which increased my interest and concern about how they went about their everyday lives.

In parallel, I got associated with the Research Institute for Human and Agricultural Development (RIHAD), a non-government organisation in Kolkata where I have been working for the last ten years and where I have had the opportunity to work closely with children at the village level in source districts of migration and child trafficking in West Bengal. I slowly started drawing linkages between the diverse experiences of children and families in the villages and the urban street children and started reading more and more about them. So, when I decided to pursue my M. Phil, the topic that naturally came to mind was children working on the streets.

My M. Phil dissertation, titled 'Exploring the Lives of Working Children Living on Streets: A Study of Kolkata City', attempted to understand why children left their homes, why they started working on the urban streets, what kinds of work they were engaged in, and so on. From here, I moved into my doctoral programme to focus more on railway street children without families, a group regarded as one of the most deprived even among the larger category of street children.

The current chapter is organised as follows. The first section outlines the broad methodological approaches that have been adopted in studies of 'children in street situations'(CISS). These approaches have focused on quantitative and qualitative methods, and I mark out these two approaches to emphasise how my own methodological approach is located vis-à-vis these two strands. The second section describes the fieldwork sites in detail while at the same time drawing attention to the changes in the urban spaces around the field sites and the possible implications of these changes for CISS. The third section shares information on the methods of data collection and analysis. The penultimate section deals with ethics of research related to my study and relevant dilemmas and concerns, followed by a conclusion in the form of a discussion of the main issues in this chapter.

Research Methodology and Methodological Contributions

At a broad level, two strands of methodological directions can be identified when examining issues related to CISS. One of these two is a body of research that focuses on the generation of knowledge for action, mainly in terms of policy and programme design initiatives, which can improve

conditions of CISS[4]. The other can be located in social sciences academic scholarship guided more by the objective of knowledge for understanding. Though these two strands often tend to overlap and have similar underlying concerns, there are also significant disconnects between the two. As observed by de Benítez (2011), the two strands of research often do not speak to each other, with disciplinary and academic research on CISS in sociology, anthropology, and geography being conducted within narrow disciplinary silos and seldom providing policy or interventional insights. Understandably, the policy strand is more oriented towards quantitative data collection methods such as quantitative surveys while the social sciences disciplinary strand uses qualitative techniques, including ethnography and participatory methods of data collection with children. The former is focused more on the estimation of numbers and characteristics of the population/sample being studied. At the same time, the latter is directed towards exploring experiences, aspirations, and everyday lives of CISS. My study is aligned to the second strand, and in this section, I discuss the methodology used and the implications within the broader context of social science research in this area.

In terms of methodology, my study aligns with the broader social science approach that has been used in studies of CISS across the world and different social science disciplines. While there are variations within this broad approach, it can be characterised by qualitative methods that range from case studies (Aderinto 2000; Conticini 2008) to ethnographic studies (Aptekar 1988; Hecht 1998; Invernizzi 2003; Balagopalan 2014). However, most studies combine standard qualitative data collection methods such as semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions with small samples from the surveyed population, where the primary survey – in case of studies that encompass entire cities – is often conducted through one of the following techniques: observational headcount, respondent-driven sampling, or capture-recapture method (see, Barry 2019).

Though motivated initially by an ethnographic approach, I gradually realised that the features of classical ethnographic work would be challenging to adopt and replicate for the context that I was studying. Both the level of sustained immersion in the 'field' and method of 'participant observation' were rendered difficult by my class and gender identities as well the everyday realities

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[4] These include areas of law, economics, public policy, and development/social welfare.

of the site and respondents that were marked by petty crime, deception and the ever-present need of CISS to conceal their whereabouts from 'others' (commuters, shopkeepers, law enforcers, NGO members). Given the floating nature of CISS in the chosen geography and the lack of resources for a survey, I also did not opt for mapping the population of CISS by any standard quantitative survey methods. In addition, the objectives of my research focused on the everyday lives of CISS and the intention to understand the routine nature of their material and emotional needs and deprivations. This aligned more strongly to the qualitative social science approaches (including ethnographies) that have privileged understanding of the meaning-making processes that the respondents make of their everyday lives from their situated realities. Overall, the study was a long-duration (2014 to 2018) field-based qualitative study using several different complementary data collection tools – non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, structured interviews, and participatory play activities. The sample list of key respondents from across different respondent groups is provided in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Sample list of key respondents

Timeline	Respondent Type	Number
	CISS	
2014-2017	Children living on the street without family (in and around Sealdah station)	
	More than one interaction	54 [M = 43; F 11] Age group: 6 years to 14 years
	Sub-sample of above where interactions were more intensive and done multiple times	11 (among these 54 children) [M=7; F=4] Age group: 10 years to 14 years
2014 - 2017	Children living with family on the street with whom interaction was done multiple times (in and around Sealdah station	4 [M=1; F=3] Age group: 10 years to 14 years Family members = 3

Timeline	Respondent Type	Number
2015 - 2018	**Other Stakeholders**	
	NGO (Implementation agencies) senior officials	6
	Funding agencies (National, International)	4
	NGO field staff	6
	Government officials (involved in Planning of Welfare Schemes; senior level: Directors)	3
	Government officials (field-level)	4
	ex-NGO officials / members	3
	ex - Government officials	2
	ex-Funding Agency members	2
	Interaction with RPF, GRP (Sealdah Platform)	4
	Traffic police (5 Km radius of Sealdah station)	6
	Shopkeeper, railway staff (Sealdah Station area)	5
	NGO network member (focused on Trafficking & Sexual Exploitation of Children)	3

In terms of methodological contributions of this study, the 'field' of the study, as compared to other studies done with railway children, was multi-sited, where I followed a floating and somewhat fluid (in terms of possible boundaries of the field) cohort of children across different sites, both near to and far from the main site of the study. Drawing from Bemak (1996), I took on the role of a 'street researcher' to move away from a conventional single site or location to a somewhat larger network of sites – the street, the marketplace, the premises of government

hospitals, inside railway stations, around road-side hotels and other railway platforms. As Bemak (1996: 149) astutely observes,

> The street researcher must answer significant questions regarding a challenging population. The subject pool, street children, is generally unreliable, sometimes dishonest, frequently distorts the hurts of the past, often neither remembers nor cares about details that may be important to street researchers and frankly is not concerned with whether or not the researcher's work is going well. One cannot pinpoint meeting times with street children nor specific places to meet. Unlike many subjects in research projects, street children are not cooperative, responsive subjects – sometimes they will talk; other days, they cannot be found or have little interest in spending time with you, the researcher. Interviews may end with an interviewee leaving abruptly if there is a distraction on the street, or they suddenly have an impulsive thought leading to a quick departure and an unexplained dismissal of the researcher.

As I outline in the sections on my data collection, much of this resonated with my own experience. Moreover, in my role as a 'street researcher,' I tried to understand the notion of 'field' as a space that traces processes and movements of railway street children without families and multiple other social actors whose presence and actions intersect in one way or the other in the everyday lives of the former (Marcus 2012). This is different from an understanding of the 'field' as a delimited geographical space with pre-defined subjects of research as has been the practice in more traditional ethnographic studies of street children (Aptekar 1988; Kovats-Bernat 2006).

The prolonged fieldwork conducted during this study, and the diverse qualitative methods used also helped me to move away from dominant discourses of street children being 'victims' or 'deviants' or as mere 'subjects of welfare interventions', to an understanding of these children being active agents who make contextually situated meaning of their everyday realities in complex ways. Finally, the interactions with and review of interventions of the State and non-State actors have made the study attentive to how the interpretation of 'structural' problems and deployment of solutions to address such problems by these actors, interplay with the 'agency' of the children in contradictory ways. In the next section, I describe my fieldwork area in detail.

Fieldwork Site: in and around Sealdah Station[5]

As previously discussed, estimates of the numbers of urban street children worldwide and in India have been unreliable and differ across studies and agencies reporting on this issue. This is no different for street children in Kolkata. Balagopalan (2014), in her research, cites data from the Ministry of Social Welfare that had estimated 10.9 million people living in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1992, with around 75,000 to 2,00,000 of them being children living on the streets. Recent surveys by Save the Children in Kolkata and again in Kolkata-Howrah, have found significantly lower numbers (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2: Estimates of street children Kolkata

	Kolkata		Kolkata-Howrah	
	2013-2014		2016	
	number	by category (%)	number	by category (%)
Children living on street	3172	16	3198	14.6
Children working on street	7080	35	3549	16.2
Children from street families	9778	49	14722	67.2
Others*			438	2
Total number of street children	20030	100	21907	100
% to total city population	0.45		0.4	

Source: PricewaterhouseCoopers and Save the Children (PWC & StC) (2015); Save the Children (2016).
*This refers to children who spend most of their time in the streets (playing on the streets or accompanying parents to the workplace). These are neither homeless nor working and hence categorised as 'others'.

The most recent survey by the same organisation conducted across the following cities in India – Delhi, Agra, Allahabad, Kanpur, Lucknow, Mughal Sarai, Nashik, Pune and Kolkata – found a total of 2,02,765 street children, with 20,068 in Kolkata (Save the Children 2019).

The focal area of fieldwork for my study was the Sealdah Railway Station, Kolkata, a hub of socio-economic activities and one of the busiest railway stations in India. Historically, Sealdah

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[5] See Appendix 2, List of Maps.

Railway Station (see Appendix 2, Map: 2.1 and 2.2), located at Sealdah in central Kolkata, had been a crucial entry point for the rural population of West Bengal to enter Kolkata city and an important connector, in addition to Howrah, between Kolkata and different parts of India. Sealdah Station handles around 12 lakh passengers daily. With three terminals (Sealdah Main, Sealdah North and Sealdah South), 13 platforms, locomotive sheds (known as car sheds), RPF Booth, multiple ticket counters, office of the Station Master, GRP office, public toilets (both formal and makeshift ones made by commuters), several food counters, bookstalls, engineer's room, waiting room, morgue, parking lot (having the capacity to accommodate private cars and cabs for public use) and so on, Sealdah station is considered as one of the busiest stations not only in Kolkata but also in India. The entire area is a convergence of almost all kinds of amenities. With the presence of several types of transportation facilities for passenger and goods (bus, autorickshaw, van rickshaw, car, taxi, cycle, lorry), banks, whole-sale-markets, hospitals, cinema halls, schools, shopping mall, small to medium shops offering diverse goods and services, public and private offices, and police stations, the entire area is a bustling and vital hub of Kolkata city – for people across different socio-economic backgrounds. Moreover, even during night hours, the place remains busy when compared to other parts of Kolkata city.

Sealdah was chosen over the other important station Howrah for a number of reasons. First, during my fieldwork period, the vigilance on street children was stricter in Howrah as compared to Sealdah, and so fewer street children were accessible in Howrah on an everyday basis. Second, I had prior familiarity with the area around Sealdah and had established rapport with some of the local people. Given that the context of my research was not always safe, I felt surer about Sealdah in terms of personal safety and knew that I could reach out for support and help if such a need arose. Most importantly, if we further focus our lens on the specific category of my interest in this study, the railway street children, the report by PricewaterhouseCoopers and Save the Children (2015) indicates that the Sealdah Railway Station has a daily inflow of around 12 children, a number that is significantly high in the overall range of 3 (Jhansi) to 40 (Old Delhi) that has been found across major railway stations across India. Not only that, as can be seen from a web article during the period of my fieldwork:

> The precise number of minors who go missing from Sealdah's 20 platforms is unknown.
> The only ones documented are those fortunate enough to be rescued. Between June 2016

and last May [2017], 1628 vulnerable children, most of them travelling alone, were retrieved – the highest number ever found at a single train station in India. Of these, 134 were girls, and the youngest was four years old. Hundreds more were apprehended by police, entirely for their safety.[6]

The rapid urbanisation of the immediate neighbourhood over the past few years has seen changes outside the station premises, such as the construction of a vertical garden in front of the Sealdah main entrance, demolition of an earlier passenger subway and construction of a car park and the new Metro Railway construction (including a station) in its place, temporary enclosure for a previously scattered and extended waste dump, and sprouting up of an enormous shopping mall. The inside of the station has also seen a spate of reorganisation with high-end food courts, jewellery shops, and replacement of a storeroom for dead bodies ('*lash-kata ghor*') from railway accidents by new construction. The platforms inside the station have also been rearranged and extended. However, much of my fieldwork was in the older premises, especially on platform numbers one, nine, ten, fourteen, and the subway, where CISS primarily sought shelter during the night. Besides the station, surrounding areas such as Bank of India (Sealdah Branch), Koley Market, Shishir Market, Baithakkhana, NRS Hospital, and Moulali were covered as these were the places most frequented by CISS for different means of earnings. Koley market (see Appendix 3, Photo 3.3) deserves a special mention as it is one of the oldest wholesale markets of Kolkata, and India, with hawkers and salespeople setting up shops and counters for meat, fruits, vegetables, tea, milk, poultry products, grains, flower, dry fruits, dried fish, and fresh spices. Locally, the fruit market is known as *Folpatti* and the vegetable market as *Sabjipatti*, with the provisions for these markets being brought daily from adjoining districts of Kolkata.

Besides the station and its immediate surroundings, extended areas such as College Square, Bara Bazar, Dum Dum, Tiljala, Topsia, Rajabazar, Babughat, Park Circus, and Esplanade were also covered; these were sites often sought out by the different groups of CISS for their daily sustenance. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 (see Appendix 1) provide a sketch map of the fieldwork sites highlighting the key locations where I could interact with street children and the changes in the main Sealdah area between 2014 and 2018. Most of the street children in Sealdah came from rural

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[6] The Guardian, 30 July 2017; Mark Townshend, The scandal of the missing children abducted from India's railway stations. URL: https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jul/30/global-development-india-child-trafficking; accessed 01 September, 2019.

regions of West Bengal, particularly South 24 Parganas, Malda and Siliguri. However, there were children from other states such as Bihar and Chhattisgarh, and even the neighbouring country Bangladesh.

In the following section, I outline the principal methods of data collection that I used— non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews, structured interviews, participatory play activities, and analysis of official documents.

'Street Researcher': following Street Children and Data Collection

Non-participant Observation

Primary data collected from the street children was done mainly on the street, marketplace, premises of Government Hospital, in front of the nearby film theatre, inside trains (when passengers had left), around road-side hotels and on the railway platforms. The data was collected in a context that was always in flux, with continuous mobility of people and activities, and often highly congested. Intensive fieldwork was done for around two years and eleven months (January 2014- December 2016). In addition, I went back to the field as and when required to bridge certain gaps that emerged during my data review and analysis stages.

Despite following the role of a 'street researcher' as suggested by Bemak (1996), locating street children without families in and around the Sealdah Railway Station was made difficult by the elusive, mobile, and unpredictable nature of their daily lives. However, I had an advantage in entering the field. Before joining my M. Phil research degree course, I used to work with a renowned NGO that also had programmes with street children in Kolkata. Thus, I had a broad understanding of the areas where street children could be found and was also acquainted with some of the street children who had, as they grew older, moved on to work with NGOs as field staff. These youth members helped me as 'gatekeepers' to access specific sites to find the younger children currently on the streets and without families. I deliberately avoided using contacts of NGOs and even these youth members to directly gain access, as this had implications for the 'reliability' of the data. While 'reliability' in terms of data discrepancies between reported and the actual number of street children has been dealt with in the literature, the 'reliability' of qualitative

data collection approaches is not visible firmly in existing studies. As Aptekar and Stoecklin (2014: 145) observe in the case of street children in general:

> The use of observations can also yield information about the validity and reliability of the children's histories. For example, if a child says that he goes home to give money to his family every day, but you see him sleeping rough, there is a validity problem. If he tells different stories about himself each day, you have a problem with data reliability.

In my case, access to street children, through NGOs or youth who were earlier part of the streets, would have likely biased their responses due to perception of institutional linkages and power hierarchies, something I later found to be true in the interactions of street children with NGO fieldworkers (see Chapter 5). However, I did seek the support of the youth to gain legitimacy among my key respondents, and this was by asking the youth (who were street children earlier and still knew the current cohort well) to casually pass by when I was meeting the current cohort of street-children and acknowledge that they knew me from previous interactions.

After identifying some of the groups that at that time made up the entire population of street children in and around Sealdah railway station in the period December 2013 to February 2014, I had to also deal with inter-and intra-group dynamics among the street children by identifying the group leaders, without who the other street children were wary of interacting with me individually or even as a group. While explaining to the group leaders and street children that the objective of my entire exercise was an academic research study, where their consent was essential and that all information shared by them would be kept anonymous and confidential, the wariness of the street children about my intentions was not addressed immediately. My non-participant observation aligned with an unstructured observation approach, where I tried to record the daily activities and behaviour of the street children in as much descriptive detail as possible without a structured observation schedule (Bryman 2012). However, I could sense that the street children were also observing me in turn, and my conversations with stakeholders other than the street children – NGO staff members, police personnel, CRPF members, and so on – were often being tracked.

I could address this wariness partially by sharing with the street children the nature of my conversations with the other stakeholders and how those were also important for my study. However, the turning point during my fieldwork, when mutual trust was enhanced, was through a

particular incident about a year after my fieldwork started. In February 2015, I happened to lose my purse during my fieldwork in Sealdah and was extremely despondent as it contained, besides my bank cards and cash, a pen drive with data related to my fieldwork. I shared this with the street children group I was interacting with most intensively, and they, through their networks, managed to retrieve the purse and pen drive for me, though without the remaining contents. This incident, in a way, built a bridge of trust and reciprocity between the street children and me that was much stronger than the previous period of my fieldwork.

While there are many details from my observations with the street children that come up in Part Two of my dissertation, I would like to underline some of the issues that would have been impossible to understand without such non-participant observation, and the challenges that came with this method. First, such observations with the children revealed to me how children undertook searching of trains ('*gari-khonja*') for leftover food and other materials, immediately after passengers started disembarking from the long-distance trains, and how this work had a hierarchy of groups allocated for specific trains. Second, the somewhat casual indifference to death as an everyday occurrence and an acute awareness of the precarious and transient nature of their own lives was also revealed to me in the ways the children participated in the disposal of victims of railway accidents or suicides, and thereafter sorted through materials among these dead bodies in the morgue ('*lash-kaata ghor*') adjoining the railway station. Third, how small underage children were appropriated for and participated, for their own livelihoods, in the demanding task of unloading trucks carrying vegetables, fish and other provisions to the wholesale Koley Market was seen to be believed. That the local police and shopkeepers' unions were complicit in this illegal practice was also made clear in these early morning observations where the entire task was completed between 4:00 am and 6:00 am. Finally, I would never have understood the nature of the need for safety, security and a sense of belonging that these street children sought on the street, without observations done late in the night when these children returned to their hideouts around the Sealdah Railway Station. These hideouts included the space below the huge water tank that supplies water to the entire area around Sealdah and open spaces along the nearby canal. The need for street children to have someone else from among the group close to them, and often the need for a sense of touch or being in contact with another member from the group, while they were sleeping, was revealed to me during these observations.

There were significant field-level challenges in the process of undertaking such observations. My gender identity compounded these challenges in certain instances while surprisingly supporting my work in other cases. For example, as neither a pre-discussed schedule or topic/theme of discussion could be followed for observations with the children, with street children mostly responding and appearing according to their own priorities for the day, I would have to stand alone in busy marketplaces and on the platform and near the railway station for long periods, waiting for them to appear. This, often aroused curiosity among the locals, and even elicited glances, suggesting I was soliciting clients on the streets. For the observations early in the day in Koley Market and late evenings or at night, I would generally have my spouse with me at a distance as I felt unsafe during those times and in those spaces. The unloading of vegetables, fish and other goods at Koley Market done by children was in complicity with the local shopkeepers and law-keepers. The officer-in-charge of the local police station explicitly advised me to maintain a distance, observe these activities and not take any photographs. On the other hand, I received continued and generous support and guidance from the police and CRPF staff at the railway station and in its surroundings regarding my safety, about specific places and timeslots to avoid, and also on how I could get my observations done in a more accessible manner.

In addition to the key respondents of my study – street children without families and some with families – I also undertook observations of the two NGO open shelters that used to exist in Sealdah during the period of my fieldwork but have, since then, been closed down. The NGO staff were not very keen that I do observations within the shelters, and I would stand at a distance from the shelters and record the day's activities in these shelters.

Interviews

Though I use the broad category of 'Interviews' as a data collection method used with different respondents, the specific types of interviews varied from one respondent group to another and from one situation to another. In a way, I use a broader definition of "An interview [as] a particular type of conversation between two or more people. Usually, the interview is controlled by one person who asks questions of the other. Interviews are used to find out more by asking questions in a wide range of contexts, for example, …by social researchers who want to find out more about what people think, feel or experience" (Matthews and Ross 2010: 219).

For example, interviews with street children were mostly in the form of one-to-one or one-to-many informal discussions, depending on the context and the willingness of the children to interact with me alone or as a group. With the core cohort of 11 children, these discussions occurred multiple times during my fieldwork. However, some of the discussions with the larger respondent group from among street children were fewer in number, including even only a single occasion when I could meet a few of them. As research with street children has shown, interviews in the form of informal discussions are often used to elicit from children their views about their lived experiences, relationships and practices, and find out stories about their daily lives that can throw up more important conceptual issues for investigation and policymaking (Anarfi et al. 2005; Bautista 2001).

Interviews were more of a semi-structured nature with lower-level officials of NGOs, government departments, and the immediate stakeholders in and around the Sealdah Railway Station (i.e., GRPF, RPF, shopkeepers, and commuters). While I could note down some of these interviews in detail or sketchily while doing the interviews, in other instances the discussions had to be recalled from brief pointers I could make immediately after the interviews, and then I made detailed notes as soon as I finished my fieldwork for the day.

Senior officials in the government and NGOs, both incumbent and retired, were approached with structured interview schedules that I had to leave with their personal assistants or others in the office, and then I had to continuously follow-up with for an appointment. This was more difficult than interviewing the lower-level officials. I would often use the time waiting in the offices of these senior officials to informally discuss my work with the lower-level officials in the relevant government and NGO offices. This provided rich insights into their views and opinions about the policies, programmes and schemes for the street children being implemented by these agencies, as many of these stakeholders, compared to the senior officials, were directly involved in the schemes and monitoring and supervision of the schemes.

There were two important instances where I failed to obtain consent for a formal interview that could have benefited this study. The first was with the incumbent Cabinet Minister for the Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare of the Government of West Bengal, who was willing to discuss with me informally but did not provide consent to be quoted

or cited in the study. The second was the incumbent Station Master of Sealdah Railway Station. He, despite repeated follow-ups, did not provide his consent for an interview and also indicated that the study was redundant as they had already started a drive to clean the station (this was in 2016).

Participatory Play Activities

Participatory play activities, often referred to as participatory action research activities, are used by many researchers working with street children across different geographies, for example, Beazley (2003) in Indonesia, Ataöv and Haider (2006) in Turkey, and Nieuwenhuizen (2006) and Couch (2010) in India. Different forms of activities have been used by researchers, including role-plays, theatre, photography, and drawing and painting sessions. As Aptekar and Stoecklin (2014: 148) observe, "In all of these studies, the [street] children and youth took an active role in the research, allowing them to challenge their negative public perceptions and to gain knowledge of themselves."

While I used such participatory approaches, by taking part in their games and learning more about the nature of these games, and also taught them other games I was familiar with from my experience with NGOs during my periodic informal discussions with the street children, on one occasion towards the end of my fieldwork period I used a drawing and painting activity in a more focused way (see Photo 3.4). I invited the smaller cohort of 11 children to an activity centre in Jadavpur I was familiar with, and arranged for relevant stationery materials (drawing paper, colour – both pastel and watercolours, glue). I asked the children to draw whatever they felt like drawing related to their lives. Most of them drew only pencil drawings, a few used pastel colours, but no one used watercolours for the task. When I asked the reason, they stated they were familiar with pastel colours from the NGO shelters and activity centres but were not familiar with watercolours. Using the drawings, and the discussions that I could generate with the children through the drawings, I could delve into some of the issues that had come up earlier in my fieldwork but that were still not clear to me. These included the nature of sexual intimacy among the children and the sense of security and dependence the girls experienced from this, how the children got involved in and were used for drug peddling, and the ways the street children tricked commuters in the trains for petty theft.

Official Documents

Qualitative research across different development issues have shown how 'representation' of these issues have taken place in academic studies, policies and programmes, and media, in which documents (in different forms) and their language are used as a means of understanding and conveying particular messages about the issues under consideration (Gardner and Lewis 2000; Ziai 2016).

I have accessed websites, annual reports, newsletters, case studies, research documents, and press reviews shared by NGOs and funding agencies for my research. I have consulted websites of Government Departments (mainly that of the Department of Women & Child Development and Social Welfare, Government of West Bengal and the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India). Through these websites, I reviewed annual reports, Information Education Communication (IEC) materials, training manuals, resource directories, plans, policies, and schemes related to child development, focusing on street children.

At one level, these documents helped me draft questions for the interviews with specific stakeholders and helped me gain access to some of my key respondents in both the State Department and NGOs. At another level, analysis of these documents helped me understand how both the State and non-State actors, particularly NGOs and funding agencies working in this domain, understand the problems and issues around homeless street children and the assumptions that underlie their welfare interventions with these children. This approach helped me unravel other issues that have implications for policy, in addition to definitional problems, proper estimation, and lack of integrated approaches that are more often discussed in the literature (see Chapter 5).

Analysing the Data

For the entire duration of my fieldwork, I maintained a daily diary for recording all my observations and interviews. Some of these could be recorded as running notes during the observations and interviews. Still, there were many instances where I could only make a note of the main points in between observations and interviews, as either the situations did not allow for

running notes in detail (example, observations of street children sleeping at night, peddling drugs, and undertaking manual labour in Koley Market in the early mornings), or so that the respondent did not feel threatened by the act of writing down while undertaking the interview (example, with CRPF, police staff, field-officers of NGOs in many instances). I would detail out these notes as soon as I returned from the field as earlier research had cautioned me to the possibility of forgetting and mixing up observations and events if primary field notes were not elaborated upon soon after the actual data collection processes.

Subsequently, I digitised the fieldnotes and reviewed them continuously based on newer experiences and observations to develop meta-notes. These meta-notes helped me formulate new questions, probe where some data was missing, and draw connections to previous data in terms of similarities and dissimilarities. Overall, I used Thematic Analysis (TA) to develop themes and sub-themes through which I could draw patterns from the data. Thematic Analysis is an approach that is akin to quantitative analysis using MS Excel, with cases/respondents and variables (themes and sub-themes) across the different axes (Bryman 2012). As Clarke and Braun (2017: 297) clarify:

> TA provides accessible and systematic procedures for generating codes and themes from qualitative data. Codes are the smallest units of analysis that capture interesting data features (potentially) relevant to the research question. Codes are the building blocks for themes, (larger) patterns of meaning, underpinned by a central organising concept - a shared core idea. Themes provide a framework for organising and reporting the researcher's analytic observations. The aim of TA is not simply to summarise the data content but to identify and interpret key but not necessarily all, features of the data, guided by the research question (but note that in TA, the research question is not fixed and can evolve throughout coding and theme development).

Documents, including policies related to street children, programme documents of NGOs and state agencies, also formed another critical component of data in my study (see Chapter 5). For analysis of these documents, I used discourse analysis as a means of understanding the language in these documents, not simply in terms of what they sought to convey, but in terms of the contexts of institutional power and knowledge to which such language was inextricably connected. As meta-reviews in this area have shown, this is important to underline the differences between political

discourse, public awareness, knowledge and sentiments, and the lived realities of street children (e.g., de Benítez 2011; Aptekar and Stoecklin 2014).

Quality of Research Data

The three essential criteria used to assess any research data are validity, reliability and replicability (or generalizability) (Bryman 2012; Babbie 2013). Lincoln and Guba (1985), while extensively discussing the criteria for assessing qualitative research studies, foreground the following three – credibility, dependability, and transferability. These criteria, in a way, map onto the more commonly used ideas of validity, reliability and generalizability in studies that use more positivist paradigms.

In the qualitative narrative paradigm for my study, credibility would mean whether the study has correctly captured and represented the thoughts, actions, belief systems, practices, and everyday lives of the street children. The prolonged duration of my fieldwork, the continuous visits to the field sites over this period, and the efforts put in to build long-term rapport with a small set of street children for more in-depth discussions and observations have supported me to uncover deeper meanings of experiences, both material and symbolic, of the street children I studied. In this journey, I have also been able to critically examine my own biases and common-sensical stereotypes prevalent about these children, particularly how they are assessed vis-à-vis a middle-class normative view of children in general. For example, the views about the deviant nature of the street children were challenged in my own experience of how the children protected and took care of the younger members of the group and those who were unwell, with great responsibility. Another approach that contributed to the overall credibility of my findings was using multiple methods for triangulation of findings and probing into negative cases that did not show up as regular patterns in this triangulation.

The idea of dependability in qualitative studies refers to the detailed description of the methods and processes used to collect and interpret data. I have discussed this in the previous section and the following section. I also tried to maintain consistency among different data collection methods concerning the issues or themes that emerged from my fieldwork and that I

wanted to follow up on. For example, observations about 'safe' places that street children used as their shelters were followed up with discussions around their understanding of 'safety' and the nature of 'safety' that particular 'safe' places afforded to the children. I consciously avoided using any digital devices such as audio or video recorders for my observations and discussions, though there are studies that have used such devices in other contexts with street children (e.g., Aderinto 2000; Naterer and Godina 2011). In my context, I surmised that the use of such devices would only be seen as intrusive and would probably bias the responses of my participants in specific ways. I did, however, use digital photography in a non-intrusive manner and with consent, to capture some of the specific details that could complement my observation and interview data.

Qualitative studies are not expected to be generalisable in the same way as quantitative studies that particularly use random-sampling approaches to choose samples from a larger population of respondents. Consequently, what is assessed in qualitative studies is the idea of transferability or the ability of the study to transfer its findings to other similar sites or resonate in its findings with studies done in such similar sites. At one level, I have tried to provide a rich and detailed description of my field sites in this chapter to convey the study's specific context and its main participants. At another level, the issues and themes discussed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 show how many of these are common for street children across different sites globally, while at the same time illuminating the nuances of the context-specific nature of some of these issues and themes.

Ethical Concerns

Reminding myself about ethical concerns of research with vulnerable street children was one of the very foundations of my research. Reflections related to this came across my way continuously over the fieldwork period. This section highlights some of the key ethical dilemmas and concerns related to my study.

Though taking informed consent is one of the most crucial aspects regarding maintaining ethics with the respondents, the relevance of informed consent has been questioned in multiple studies for specific categories of respondents, including children (e.g., Hammersley 2017). Studies have also discussed the distinct difference between ethical codes and ethical values. For many

researchers, the ethical obligation was limited only to a letter of consent to secure the researchers' own 'protection' (Homan 1992). Thus, the importance of ethical commitment came into the foreground rather than ethical codes in such research. I tried to align with the more robust idea of ethical codes for my own study. While written consent for street children seemed meaningless, I sought informed consent verbally from each child. I tried my best to explain to them the nature of my research and discuss the progress of my fieldwork with them at various stages. It was not that differences in material situations between my middle-class background and that of the children who lived on uncertain earnings one day to the other could be erased in our interactions or understanding of each other. What I could do, however, as suggested by Hecht (1998), was not to be indifferent to the multiple vulnerabilities that shaped the everyday of these street children. I tried to spend as much time as possible beyond my regular observation hours to just discuss what was happening in their lives and some of their daily problems and moments of happiness. Much of these discussions, often mundane, and about petty joys and sorrows of their everyday lives, does not form a part of this thesis; however, it did help me negotiate the emotional burden that was part of the entire journey where I could not directly bridge the material gap between us in any way or could provide assurance of policy changes that would be beneficial to their lives. Interestingly, the entire effort behind the study coming from within an academic institution made many of them sympathetic to my position in a somewhat amusing and ironic manner where they remarked, "*ekhono lekhapora koro? ki baje case!*" (You still study at this age? What a sad thing). It was as if they could not believe an adult of my age would want to pursue studies when many of them were earning their livelihoods (in whatever way they understood) at a much younger age.

Social Science research methods consider anonymity and issues of confidentiality an essential component of studies of deviant social phenomena, such as drug offences, corruption, and other illegal activities (e.g., Bryman 2012; Babbie 2013). While these are issues of importance in any research study, they become critical in studies of deviant social behaviour and practices as the researcher negotiates her fieldwork and information among multiple stakeholders, including the so-called lawbreakers and lawmakers. In my study, I was attentive to this from the very beginning but found that my key respondents were quite indifferent to the requirement of any such ethical codes from my end. As they explained, "everyone knows everything", to convey that other stakeholders were often aware and complicit in the nature of the everyday lived realities of homeless street children, including the activities considered illegal. However, from my end, I

exercised as much discretion as possible on sensitive issues such as drug dealing or substance abuse. These often came up in more open-ended discussions about the health of some of the children. Indeed, the street children were more secretive and cautious about some more personal aspects of their street life. As I gradually found out, these were incidents that the children tried to keep a secret even from their close friends, including that of sexual abuse (not known within the group), and 'deals' they made with other stakeholders for their safety and security, unknown to the group. In the long term, these were revealed only in one-on-one discussions by a few among the smaller group of children I could follow up with.

The official letter of permission for the study and fieldwork that I had from the institute (CSSSC) facilitated my entry into the corridors of senior functionaries in the Women and Child Development Department, Government of West Bengal and senior officials in both international agencies and national NGOs working on street children and having offices in Kolkata. Formal letters of consent were relatively easily obtained from these senior officials, though both help of 'gatekeepers' such as lower-level staff in these offices and repeat visits were required. This proved difficult with stakeholders such as the RPF, GRPF, police, local shopkeepers, and station authorities, who only allowed oral consent and were wary of providing written consent. These interactions made it clear how power is perceived among different levels of the state machinery and society and how formal written letters of consent are seen as possible threats by the lower-level state machinery from those higher up in the hierarchy and their reluctance to trust 'outsiders' with information that could show them in poor light.

Finally, the relation of the self (the researcher) to the other (those being studied) formed a backdrop for all my interactions with the street children and reflections on the data collected. It has been pointed out that reflexivity is achieved by how the researcher's own characteristics can influence what she sees and how she interprets data (Babbie 2013). Through this, researchers can build and rebuild their interpretations of field experiences. Thus, it was vital for me to be continuously aware of the social inequalities that marked the position between the street children and me and be attentive to the common-sensical portrayals and interpretations through a middle-class model of normativity of the lived experiences of street children as being deviant.

Summary

Studies of street children using in-depth qualitative research approaches are difficult to find in the Indian context. Most studies done by NGOs adopt a survey-based approach where estimates of street children become the key focus rather than the material and symbolic contexts of their everyday lives. Moreover, reflections on these research approaches are still rarer, though this is more a prevalent practice in qualitative studies in other areas of social policy. In its overall methodological thrust, this research was quite different from the standard survey-based approaches and adopted a long-duration, immersive qualitative approach that was more aligned to ethnographic approaches conducted in this domain.

The long duration of the fieldwork, from 2014 to 2018, provided insights into an understanding of the everyday lives and meaning-making processes that are imbibed in the daily routines and activities of homeless street children. As Bryman (2012: 30), commenting on the main distinction between the natural sciences and the social sciences, rightly observes, this

> resides in the fact that social reality has meaning for human beings, and therefore human action is meaningful—that is, it has a purpose for them, and they act based on the meanings that they attribute to their acts and to the acts of others (…) it is the job of the social scientist to gain access to people's 'common-sense thinking' and hence to interpret their actions and their social world from their point of view.

The intensive fieldwork, though not ethnographic, allowed me to use multiple data collection methods, both with street children and with other stakeholders. With street children, besides non-participant observation, life history interviews, unstructured interviews/discussions, I could also use play-activity to delve into some issues that were unclear to me from the other methods. For other stakeholders, though it was primarily semi-structured and structured interviews, other sources such as documents shared by these institutional stakeholders, and web resources of the government and NGOs acted as complementary secondary data. These multiple methods, and sources of data, at one level, helped in the triangulation of the themes and sub-themes emerging from the study, and helped to identify patterns and reasons behind the different issues that this thesis ultimately focuses on. At another level, this approach helped me further probe into

narratives, themes, and sub-themes where I found contradictory evidence that did not match the emerging patterns and prompted me to examine possible explanations for these outliers.

The approach of a street-researcher helped immensely with the understanding of the field as being beyond only the focal area of the study – the Sealdah Railway Station – and carried me along with the children to other sites in the city and allowed me to gain an understanding of what these sites mean to the children in terms of their instrumental and symbolic needs. This multi-sited nature of the study, somewhat comparable to a hub-and-spoke system, allowed me to experience the urban space these street children occupied or frequented both as 'everyday life' at the margins (Lefebvre 1991) and gain insights into the ways how macro-structures and welfare politics related to urban planning and street children impinge upon and mediate these everyday lives.

On the other hand, my position as a mother of a young child and as a researcher on the street exposed me to the questions of ethical asymmetry in such research endeavours at two significant levels. First, being both a mother and a researcher, the very insecure and unsafe nature of the lives of homeless street children raised questions about how much I would be able to do through my study that would have any meaningful impact on their lives. In the short term, I lived this question almost daily in my interactions with them, where I could not even address the precarity related to most of their everyday basic needs. Second, the street also appeared to be a more condensed form of gender hierarchies that characterise our society at large, with my location and engagement as a street researcher open to the same scrutiny of male commuters, shopkeepers, and other stakeholders in a way that reflected how male members continue to use their gaze to objectify women (especially women on the street) as being open to their sexual overtures and innuendoes.

Even with these challenges and constraints, the intensive long-duration qualitative fieldwork at multiple sites within the city with homeless street children and with multiple relevant stakeholders provided insights that will become clearer in the following three chapters. In the second part of my dissertation, I address my study's three key research questions.

PART TWO

EVERYDAY LIVES OF STREET CHILDREN

CHAPTER 3: IDENTITY, STIGMA, AND SUBCULTURE

Introduction

This chapter addresses the first of my key research questions: *How are the individual and collective identities of homeless CISS in Sealdah constructed? How do the children negotiate their ever-present label of being 'less than normal'? What defines the subculture of these so-called deviant and marginal urban groups?* In Chapter One, I had outlined the key issues through which the literature around CISS in general, and homeless CISS in particular, evolved. To recall, these issues are definitions of such children, the lack of proper estimates and mapping of these children, the multiple problems and concerns surrounding the everyday realities of these children, and the lack of meaningful and coordinated policy or programmatic interventions to address these challenges.

These issues are inextricably linked to the three main conceptual issues that I explore in this chapter through my empirical work – identity, stigma, and subculture. Childhood studies have shown how the representation of the child in terms of 'universal' discourses of childhood and development have contradictorily, instead of carving out contextually specific identities of children, focused on this category as separate from the category of adulthood and notions of adulthood (example, biological age, labour, sexuality), and essentialised childhood in specific normative ways (Hopkins and Sriprakash 2016; Menon and Saraswathi 2018). In this representation, the context, culture, community, history, and the specific circumstances of the lived realities of the child have been erased, and universal markers of childhood with the "adult-child relationship [working] as a structuring metaphor for how hierarchies can be maintained or reproduced within society" have come into being (Hopkins and Sriprakash 2016: 10). Institutions and mechanisms of law, the State, and formal schooling then became the means through which such a 'universal' childhood was sought to be realised.

However, as I noted in Chapter One, critiques of such a notion of universal childhood have emerged in more recent years, both within the area of Childhood Studies and other disciplinary areas in the social sciences. Though differing in their perspectives, the "transcendent assumption that unites these contributions is the social, cultural and temporal variability of childhoods" (Menon and Saraswathi 2018: 7), as available within a social constructivist paradigm. Broadly

aligning with this paradigm, I attempt to unpack how the ideas of identity, notion of stigma and deviant subculture are revealed in the everyday lives of homeless CISS and how we can re-evaluate these conceptual categories through a social constructivist paradigm to provide more contextually located understanding of their implications in specific marginal settings in the Global South.

Context of Origin: Brief Life Histories

This thesis employs 'children in street situations' (referred to as CISS) as a category to specifically refer to homeless children living on the street, rather than a broader understanding of CISS as used by development agencies. There are different meanings attached to categorising children as 'street children' instead of 'children in street situations'. The category of 'street children' has been critiqued for failing to consider the social dynamics of the everyday lives of these children. Lucchini and Stoecklin (2020) argue that street situations need to be viewed as sites where asymmetrical relations of power are exercised. This perspective is critical in order to understand children as active agents in the process of their identity formation – shaped by cultural representations of childhood and social structures in different contexts. The social construction of 'street situations', and the diverse range of the observed behaviours and strategies – such as verbal competencies, and use of symbolic resources – adopted by these children, help in opening up a window for viewing the processes through which the relationship between institutions, people and CISS are mediated (Lucchini and Stoecklin 2020). By being 'visible' in public, CISS are seen as a social problem, which endows them with an 'outsider' identity.

The origin or sources of homeless CISS in Sealdah station is quite diverse, as it is in most contexts in urban India and the developing countries in general, and it is essential to consider this diversity. As compared to my fieldwork period, current intervention approaches are slowly recognising the need to work at different levels, focusing on sources of origin of street children to address this issue better. Table 3.1 summarises the context of the origin of the larger group of 54 street children I could interact with; specific pseudonyms have been provided only for the key respondent group of 11 children I could interact with more closely and continuously throughout my fieldwork.

Table 3.1: Brief Profile of CISS Respondent Group

Sl. No	Pseudonyms of 11 key respondents	Place of origin	Distance from Sealdah Station (km; approx.)	Reason for leaving home	Duration of stay in Sealdah without family (in years; approx.)	Age (completed years; approx)	Sex	Assistance while leaving home
1	Raju	Ghutiarisharif (South 24 P)	31	family earning was not enough, and scope of earning was not available and thus wanted to earn money	3	12	M	With friend
2	Rajen Das	Ghutiarisharif (South 24 P)	31	family income was not enough, fear of going to school and negligence from parents	2	11	M	With friend
3	Puja Das	Ghutiarisharif (South 24 P)	31	Stepfather's attempt to rape	2	12	F	With friend

Sl. No	Pseudonyms of 11 key respondents	Place of origin	Distance from Sealdah Station (km; approx.)	Reason for leaving home	Duration of stay in Sealdah without family (in years; approx.)	Age (completed years; approx)	Sex	Assistance while leaving home
4	Kareena	Mallikpur (South 24 P)	21	abusive behaviour of father	2.5	13	F	With friend
5	Raja Das	Canning (South 24 P)	45	stepfather's apathy towards working and earning, financial crunch in family, pressure on the child to earn, conflict between parents, fear of going to school	1.5	11	M	With friend
6	Priya	Mallikpur (South 24 P)	21	rejection from stepmother and experiencing	1	11	F	Alone

Sl. No	Pseudonyms of 11 key respondents	Place of origin	Distance from Sealdah Station (km; approx.)	Reason for leaving home	Duration of stay in Sealdah without family (in years; approx.)	Age (completed years; approx)	Sex	Assistance while leaving home
				abusive behaviour from stepmother				
7	Rajesh Raja	Ghutiarisharif (South 24 P)	31	poverty and negligence by parents	3.5	14	M	With friend
8	Rahim	Mallikpur (South 24 P)	21	frequent migration of family in search of work	2	13	M	With friend
9	Suraj	Mallikpur (South 24 P)	21	fear of going to school	2.5	14	M	With friend
10	Rani	Canning (South 24 P)	45	child's feeling of isolation within the family	1	10	F	With friend
11	Nabab	Mallikpur (South 24 P)	21	child was abandoned by family at very	2	14	M	Alone

Sl. No	Pseudonyms of 11 key respondents	Place of origin	Distance from Sealdah Station (km; approx.)	Reason for leaving home	Duration of stay in Sealdah without family (in years; approx.)	Age (completed years; approx)	Sex	Assistance while leaving home
				young age as his mother died				
12		Siliguri	592	differential treatment among siblings by parents	4	10	M	With elder brother
13		Ghutiarisharif (South 24 P)	31	poverty	1	11	M	Alone
14		Kakdwip	95	family pressure on the child to earn	6	10	M	With brother
15		Uttar Barasat	22	child was abandoned by mother and stepfather	1	11	M	With friend
16		Mallikpur (South 24 P)	21	family earning was very low and thus parents	1	12	M	With friend

Sl. No	Pseudonyms of 11 key respondents	Place of origin	Distance from Sealdah Station (km; approx.)	Reason for leaving home	Duration of stay in Sealdah without family (in years; approx.)	Age (completed years; approx)	Sex	Assistance while leaving home
				wanted the child to work				
17		Uttar Barasat	22	poverty	1	13	M	With friend
18		Mallikpur (South 24 P)	21	family violence	0.5	11	M	With friend
19		Kakdwip	95	pressure to earn money on the child	1	13	F	With friend
20		Mallikpur (South 24 P)	21	family violence	0.5	9	M	With friend
21		Bangladesh	316	overload of domestic work	1	10	M	With friend
22		Jalpaiguri	573	pressure on the child to take care of younger siblings and child,	0.5	10	M	With friend

Sl. No	Pseudonyms of 11 key respondents	Place of origin	Distance from Sealdah Station (km; approx.)	Reason for leaving home	Duration of stay in Sealdah without family (in years; approx.)	Age (completed years; approx)	Sex	Assistance while leaving home
				thus, had to leave school and stop meeting with friends				
23		Malda	337	negligence of father	0.5	11	M	With friend
24		Siliguri	592	lack of time to play due to family responsibilities and pressure to earn	3	12	M	Alone
25		Ghutiarisharif (South 24 P)	31	could not adjust in a broken family after his mother left home	1	10	M	With friend
26		Mallikpur (South 24 P)	21	poverty	1	12	M	Alone

Sl. No	Pseudonyms of 11 key respondents	Place of origin	Distance from Sealdah Station (km; approx.)	Reason for leaving home	Duration of stay in Sealdah without family (in years; approx.)	Age (completed years; approx)	Sex	Assistance while leaving home
27		Ghutiarisharif (South 24 P)	31	violence exerted on child by father	1	13	M	Alone
28		Mallikpur (South 24 P)	21	poverty	1	14	F	With friend
29		Mallikpur (South 24 P)	21	migrating family and child was habituated to live without parents	-	7	M	With friend
30		Canning (South 24 P)	45	broken family generated feeling of insecurity and feeling of becoming unsafe	0.5	10	M	With friend
31		Mallikpur (South 24 P)	21	lost	0.5	6	F	lost
32		Canning (South 24 P)	45	family pressure on the child to earn	1	12	M	With friend

Sl. No	Pseudonyms of 11 key respondents	Place of origin	Distance from Sealdah Station (km; approx.)	Reason for leaving home	Duration of stay in Sealdah without family (in years; approx.)	Age (completed years; approx)	Sex	Assistance while leaving home
33		Lakhshmikantapur (South 24 P)	61	poverty	1	13	M	Alone
34		Mallikpur (South 24 P)	21	pressure of domestic work and negligence from parents	1	10	M	With friend
35		Bihar	483	family violence	1	12	M	Alone
36		Murshidabad	197	poverty	-	11	F	With friend
37		Mallikpur (South 24 P)	21	conflict with stepsiblings and indifferent attitude of mother	2	15	M	With friend
38		Mallikpur (South 24 P)	21	father's unnecessary domination on every activity and his violent	1	12	M	Alone

Sl. No	Pseudonyms of 11 key respondents	Place of origin	Distance from Sealdah Station (km; approx.)	Reason for leaving home	Duration of stay in Sealdah without family (in years; approx.)	Age (completed years; approx)	Sex	Assistance while leaving home
				behaviour towards the child made the situation intolerable for the child				
39		Delhi	1560	fear of studying and lack of interest in going to school	1	11	M	Alone
40		Uttar Pradesh	1007	abusive behaviour of father	1	10	M	Alone
41		Bangladesh	316	parents migrated to earn, and child was left with other family member where he faced violence	1	10	M	Alone

Sl. No	Pseudonyms of 11 key respondents	Place of origin	Distance from Sealdah Station (km; approx.)	Reason for leaving home	Duration of stay in Sealdah without family (in years; approx.)	Age (completed years; approx)	Sex	Assistance while leaving home
42		Malda	337	abusive behaviour of stepmother	2	12	M	Alone
43		Mallikpur (South 24 P)	21	family violence	4	14	M	With friend
44		Namkhana (South 24 P)	108	pressure of going to work along with father to get more earning	-	8	F	With friend
45		Ghutiarisharif (South 24 P)	31	negligence of mother	1	10	M	Alone
46		Canning (South 24 P)	45	responsibility to take care of younger stepsiblings and also negligence from mother	1	12	M	With friend

Sl. No	Pseudonyms of 11 key respondents	Place of origin	Distance from Sealdah Station (km; approx.)	Reason for leaving home	Duration of stay in Sealdah without family (in years; approx.)	Age (completed years; approx)	Sex	Assistance while leaving home
47		Bihar	483	Pressure to earn money on the child	1.5	12	F	With friend
48		Ghutiarisharif (South 24 P)	31	poverty	2	13	M	With friend
49		Ghutiarisharif (South 24 P)	31	lost	0.5	10	M	lost
50		Bihar	483	fear of going to school along with negligence of family	0.5	10	M	With friend
51		Ghutiarisharif (South 24 P)	31	poverty	1	14	M	With friend
52		Mallikpur (South 24 P)	21	conflict between parents at regular basis that led to	1	12	M	With friend

Sl. No	Pseudonyms of 11 key respondents	Place of origin	Distance from Sealdah Station (km; approx.)	Reason for leaving home	Duration of stay in Sealdah without family (in years; approx.)	Age (completed years; approx)	Sex	Assistance while leaving home
				violence very often				
53		Ghutiarisharif (South 24 P)	31	financial crisis at home along with family violence	-	10	F	Alone
54		Murshidabad	197	abusive behaviour of father	1	12	M	With friend

* Total CISS respondents: 54 (M:43, F:11); Core CISS respondent group: 11 (M:7, F:4) [Serial Nos: 1 to 11]

While Table 3.1 indicates that most of the children were from neighbouring districts of Kolkata, there were several children from more distant districts like Malda, Siliguri and Murshidabad in West Bengal and only a few from other states like Bihar and Delhi. The districts and places of origin are also known as sites of out-migration and child trafficking, and the reasons for many of these CISS leaving home and finding an alternative life in Sealdah can well be located in some of these (UNODC 2013; Thusoo 2021).

A more detailed understanding of the various motives behind the children leaving their homes to lead their lives as homeless CISS in distant urban centres can also be seen in the following caselets (see Box 3.1).

Box 3.1: Caselets of Homeless CISS: Journeys from Home to Sealdah[7]

Caselet 1[8]

Raja Das, approximately 11 years of age, lived in Canning, around 60 kms. from Kolkata, in the district of South 24 Parganas. Along with his two elder brothers and one younger stepsister, he lived with his stepfather and mother. His stepfather did not have any source of livelihood and income. He used to live off his mother's labour and whatever little the children could earn and was also an alcoholic. But as he had good connections with the ruling political party, his mother did not want to leave him.

Though his stepfather did not exhibit signs of domestic violence or abuse, his laziness and bad temper was something that Raja started to dislike more and more. His elder brothers used to work as lorry drivers, mostly away from home, though they supported the family somewhat financially. Raja's mother used to cook in a roadside hotel and earn around INR 2500 per month. Thus, there was also a regular financial crunch regarding necessities at the overall family level, including food. Though Raja shared a close sibling bond with his younger stepsister, both his mother and stepfather used to mistreat him, more so because Raja refused to contribute his labour to earn and sustain his stepfather's alcoholism. As a consequence, the allocation of food for him

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[7] Note: all these children are listed in Table 3.1.
[8] Fieldnote Date: 11th July 2014.

was also reduced. Raja shared that he felt like committing suicide many times, but stopped short thinking about his younger stepsister.

However, he wanted to escape from this environment. He was enrolled in the local government school and had studied up to Class V. In the school, Raja used to be labelled as 'dumb' by the teachers as he was not good in his studies. Raja slowly started skipping school and roaming about the town to avoid school and home. He met Nandu, who was two-three years older than him, and they became good friends during this period. Nandu had never been to school and admired Raja as he had received some primary education and could read and write. Raja, in turn, found Nandu's carefree and fearless attitude towards life appealing and used to accompany Nandu and roam about in the local trains. With Nandu, he visited Sealdah and met Nandu's friends in Sealdah. He was quite happy to meet peers who treated him equally and gave him importance because he had some education.

On these day trips to Sealdah, though Nandu insisted that Raja stay overnight in Sealdah, Raja refused as he was scared. While several months passed like this, one friend of Raja's mother saw him travelling in the train, playing truant from school, and reported to his mother. Raja received a bad beating from both his mother and stepfather, and at some point, when his mother tried to stop his stepfather from beating him more, he ordered Raja to leave their house. Raja thought his mother would protest but was extremely upset to see that she did not do so, and neither made any effort to ask Raja to stay back. To add more insult to injury, his mother said, "*tai bhalo, apod gele banchi*" (it would be good if the useless fellow left; implying that Raja was of no use to the family, and it would be better if he left home).

This prompted Raja to leave home; he was not even allowed to meet his stepsister. Raja searched for Nandu, but Nandu did not turn up that day. As Raja waited and started feeling hungry, he thought of going back home and apologising; but once he returned home, he was again reprimanded and asked to leave for good. Like he had done previously with Nandu, he went to Canning station to take a train to Sealdah to see if he could find Nandu in Sealdah. After reaching Sealdah, Raja lost his bearings and started feeling scared. Remembering that Nandu had asked him to avoid the police, he tried to find a secluded place and fell asleep. He woke up when an unknown boy around his age pushed him and gave him some biscuits to eat and INR 20 and asked him to

head back home, warning that the station was a dangerous place and that he should return home. The same boy helped him get on a train to Canning.

After returning to Canning, Raja could meet Nandu and also shared with him his experience. Nandu consoled Raja and took him back to Sealdah and introduced him to a group of children he was familiar with. Since then, that is for 1.5 years when I had this discussion with Raja in July 2014, Raja had been staying at Sealdah. He shared how he initially sometimes felt sad for his stepsister, but as he believed that his family did not want him, he did not make any effort to go back home again. He gradually came to terms with life on the streets around Sealdah, along with his new set of friends.

Caselet 2[9]

Priya (age around 11 years) lived in Mallikpur (South 24 Parganas) with her stepmother. Her father used to work in Bihar and thus mostly away from home. Priya's father sent money (approx. INR 4500 per month), and her stepmother was not engaged in any paid labour. Her stepmother was rude and often beat Priya to vent her own frustrations. Priya also had to do all the household work while her stepmother watched television the entire day or gossiped with the neighbours. The only thing she used to do was cook. Priya was not even allowed to watch television and found herself in a miserable condition. Even in terms of food, Priya's stepmother often deprived her of whatever good food (fish, eggs) was cooked and served her less than required. On some days, Priya had to eat only rice with salt and chilly.

While Priya lived in this miserable manner for a long time, she started feeling uncomfortable and scared when her stepmother started inviting other men into the house at night to spend time with these men. This prompted her to run away from home one day, and she boarded a train without even knowing the destination she was headed to. As the train was for Sealdah, Priya reached the station and had been living in Sealdah station for a year when I first met her in March 2014.

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[9] Fieldnote Date: 20th March 2014.

Caselet 3[10]

Rajesh Raja (approximately 14 years old) lived in Ghutiarisharif (South 24 Parganas). He used to live with his parents, two elder sisters (16 and 18 years old respectively) and grandparents. His father worked as a daily labourer on construction sites. Though he was not sure, Rajesh indicated that his father earned around INR 8000 per month; but whatever it was, it was not sufficient for the entire family. His mother was a homemaker. Rajesh's father had a bank account and was an organised and disciplined person with a steady amount of savings for the marriage of his two daughters. However, this also implied that Rajesh did not get much pocket money from his family to spend on his own or indulge in a lifestyle that some of his friends could afford. He was unhappy with his current lifestyle and was interested in starting to earn early to satisfy his more upwardly mobile lifestyle needs.

One of Rajesh's friends at school had similar aspirations. They used to plan how to earn money quickly and afford a better lifestyle. They planned to go to Kolkata as they felt that they could get some such opportunities while working in Kolkata. Rajesh was hesitant to share this with his family as he felt that they might get upset and prevent him from taking this step. But his friend convinced him otherwise. Rajesh was also influenced considerably by the rags-to-riches stories that he came across in some of the films he had watched. He slowly became determined to move to a life in the city, with the thought that life would be better there and afford more options for earning a lot quickly. As his sisters were reaching their age of marriage, the parents were more focused on the two daughters than Rajesh— further alienating him.

Gradually, Rajesh prepared himself to leave home. Then one day Rajesh and his friend came to observe Sealdah and roamed around the marketplaces and surrounding areas. They felt convinced that they could work in the hotels and earn money fast. Soon after, as per their plans, both these friends left home and started living in Sealdah. Rajesh had been staying in Sealdah for three years when I met and discussed with him in June 2014.

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[10] Fieldnote Date: 13th June 2014.

Both Table 3.1 and Box 3.1 bring out the idea of 'structural violence' in the lives of these street children. While the idea of structural violence has been conceptualised in different ways (e.g., Galtung 1969; Brick-Utne 1989; Gupta 2012), what is common across these conceptual ideas is the influence of multiple factors – social, economic, political, institutional, and historical – in the perpetuation of unequal choices and life chances among different population groups. Both the 2007 Global Study on Violence Against Street Children and the 2018 report on Structural Violence against Children in South Asia bring out the differences of the nature of such structural violence across gender, age, ethnicities (de Benítez 2007; UNICEF 2018), some of which was also evident in my own study. In the next section, I examine the issue of 'Identity' among homeless CISS in Sealdah.

Identity

Construction of Identities: Fluidity and Permanence

As discussed earlier, the multiplicity of childhood and the heterogeneity of experiences is essential to note while studying the everyday lives of CISS. The identities of CISS have been noted to evolve in terms of an interplay among the particular life history, specific external circumstances, and the children's own appraisal of themselves in such contexts. From an earlier understanding of street children as only victims or delinquents, there has been a paradigmatic shift to an understanding of street children as constituting multiple identities and the ways they deploy these identities across different domains of their everyday lives (Lucchini 1996). One such example can be found in Stoecklin (2000), where he elaborates upon six identity clusters - the hero, the hard worker, the ambivalent, the survivor, the isolated and the dependent abused - in his work with street children in Bangladesh. Such distinct categorisations are critical since it helps us to understand 'street children' not as a homogenous group but as one that is constituted by diverse street situations (Aptekar and Stoecklin 2014).

What is evident in these different categorisations that scholars have developed in terms of their own work in diverse geographic locations is a perpetual search for an identity among street children. Emerging from conditions of structural violence that CISS are subject to, and their own

realisations of agency as part of the process of socialisation into street life, street children are ever cautious about how they present themselves to different stakeholders. Street-children have contradictory presentations of the self and express ambivalence of their identities in multiple ways. On the one hand, they try to abandon their previous identities to avoid detection and rehabilitation in the same places from where they have escaped; on the other hand, the intensive influence of the media, both films and web-based, offer opportunities for these children to appropriate identities from these sources for self-presentation in different contexts.

None of the children used their original/previous names. They used their 'street-name', that is, the names they appropriated or were given as they became members of the many groups of CISS without families in and around Sealdah. Many of the newcomers, if not having a charismatic persona of their (mostly male) own, were given names by members from the existing groups. These names were based on that newcomer's attitude, looks, and body language. For example, *bantul* (for those whose height was shorter than average), *kelo* (for those having dark complexion), *puchke* (those who were cute and had innocent looks), *koote* (for those who were thin), *kana* (for blind or short-sighted children), *shitke* (for those who were shy and did not mix with others), *teja* (for children with a good physique), *laltu* (for those with fair skin), and *dhyamna* (for those who were stubborn or adamant in their behaviour). The girls were similarly attributed names by the male children; *shutki* (a girl whose breasts were not yet developed), *mutki* (a comparatively overweight girl), *rangeela* (a girl considered to be sexually attractive), and so on.

While these attributed names for girls circulated among the male members, relatively older female children preferred to assume the names their male peers (often partners for the moment) suggested. So, girls were observed to change their names with the change of their partners (variously referred to as boyfriend, husband, or lover, depending on the status of the partnership). In such instances, popular media played a significant role with the female partners being named according to the favourite heroines (from both Bollywood and Tollywood) of their male partners, such as Chumki, Priya, Rakhi, Rekha, Puja, Modhu, Koel, Begam, Rani, Lakhkhi, and so on, and the female partners assuming these names quite willingly and unquestioningly, even with a sense of special recognition being given to them.

For male children, even though as newcomers they had to accept and respond to the names that were given by their peers or elders who were already part of the street, with time and experience, that is as they started being earning members within the groups and adopted the different norms followed by the groups, they got accepted by the others and could change their names from the ones attributed to them earlier. So, as newer children came to be understood as "*ekhon tike geche ekhaane*" (have adopted to the street culture) by the already existing children, they could adopt new names. Here again, influence of popular media was visible with male children adopting names of film stars they admired or even the names of the characters these stars had played in some of their favourite films. So, names such as Nabab, Bachchan, Salman, Khan, Jeet, and Rahul were popular names among the male children. Sometimes the children would also change their names; however, there were restrictions on who could do so and what new names were allowed. For example, restrictions prevailed over such wishes for a boy who wanted to adopt the name of another boy who was considered popular among his peers or considered to be in a leadership position. Sometimes permission was granted, but with the requirement that the boy wishing to have his name changed to that of a more popular existing one, add a prefix or suffix to the new name to distinguish his relatively lower status to the existing name; for example, a child who wanted to be 'Khan' had to add *chota/choto* (small/junior) to his name. Also, as a child gained popularity and/or assumed leadership roles, he did not prefer to change the name further with the name acquiring permanency among the peer group.

The precarious life on the streets and the frequently changing dynamics within and between groups (see Chapter Four) also created insecurity among children to establish themselves as distinct and unique from the others; as they said, becoming '*ghyama*' (outstanding) was important. However, this depended not only on children starting to earn independently and being accepted as a 'friend' by the other CISS, though these were also necessary. Other qualities required to be *ghyama* included access of the child to RPF or GRP or police, capacity to gather information from them that would protect other members in the group, ability to mobilise other children for work that required group efforts (e.g., unloading trucks; peddling drugs), and capacity to induct and train other children in the processes of everyday survival, primarily earnings-related. Besides information and people skills such as these, possession of specific assets also counted as a valuable feature in deciding whether a child was '*ghyama*' or not. These assets included multiple smartphones, multiple mobile sim cards, pen drives, fancy wristwatches, and branded liquor. Often

graduating to the position of leaders, these '*ghyama*' children became local intermediaries for recruiting children for labour that required group efforts, for moneylending, and for transactions involving drugs/addictive substances. As the children became older, popularity was also determined by the number of girls that a particular male child could attract and be around with. Though not determining leadership abilities, the ability of male children to dance, sing, provide comic relief, and imitate skills related to famous film actors also provided them with a distinct position in the group.

The more popular children, who possessed some of the above and were regarded as *ghyama*, were often to be seen teasing or mocking the other children without such skills or other material assets as '*chunoputi*' (literally small fish, and implying a nobody), explicitly making the social order of the street quite clear. A continuous tussle for higher positions in this social order was visible with the '*chunoputi*' trying to improve and project their material, informational, and other street skills to avoid harassment by the others and, in turn, trying to achieve a position to impress and bully others. Interestingly, such dynamics of ordering was visibly more so among the boys rather than the girls, and any girl who got linked in a relationship with one of the '*ghyama*' boys was considered to have '*jhakkas kopal*' (great luck). Thus, notions of patriarchy and masculinity of the larger society were also mirrored among the CISS, something that I will note in other instances.

In this world of frequently changing social order where names figured strongly in a sense of identity, however fluid, surnames were not observed to have much importance. As Rahim clarified, "*ekhane keu baper lej niye ghore na*" (no one roams here with a tag of their father/family).[11] However, children did add surnames when the situation demanded, especially during interactions with NGO staff, the RPF, the GRP, or the police. Common surnames such as Das, Ali, Khatun were used appropriately with the corresponding name. Younger children were taught that there should be a specific match of the surname to names to reflect any religion-specific name. However, as surnames were not used often, the children were sometimes not careful about being consistent with other adult stakeholders who asked them about their names. It was only during specific situations deemed necessary that children shared their surnames. These would be

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[11] Fieldnote Date: 10th September 2014.

identification drives by the police or NGOs to record their names for particular benefits. Generally, the children lied about their address when asked about the same by law keepers or NGO members, as most of them had deliberately left home and did not want to go back. As one of them said, "*Illi naki? Abar bari chalan kore debe. Dhop diye di jate na dhorte pare*" (Is it a joke or what? [that we would share our correct address] They will send us back again. We lie so that we do not get caught).[12;13] Among the CISS, social conventions of the larger society were visible in the way the children addressed others within their group, with suffixes such as '*bhai*' (literally meaning younger brother, though often used in the streets as a sign of respect), and *'di'* (for an older female member).

At the same time, mainstream normative representations of childhood were strongly resisted in different ways. For example, much of the leisure activities of CISS were in the form of games that involved betting or gambling among themselves. They regarded these games as different from what the so-called normal children of their age play. When asked about the differences between their daily non-work activities and that of 'other children', CISS were quick to point out that they regarded normal children as mostly '*adure*' or '*narugopal*' (meaning pampered), and also as '*lyad*' (that is, signifying the incapacity of these children to do anything on their own). The games the 'other' children played, such as cricket and football, were regarded by CISS as monotonous and without fun due to the multiple and complex rules that were part of these games and the absence of any possibility of risk-oriented earnings by playing these games. The CISS regarded themselves as '*rangbaj*' (someone who could show one's influence) as compared to the '*adure*' (pampered) middle-class children in these circumstances.

What was interesting to note was, though an implicit while impermanent social order was present in terms of distinguishing features, especially of male children, that could provide security – financial and physical – to other members of the group, more common ascriptive social identities such as caste and religion were not regarded as important by the CISS. Absence of both of these were evident in the fluidity of names and surnames that circulated among the children and their

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[12] Fieldnote Date: 20th September 2014.
[13] According to NGO workers, it is easier to convince children to reveal their address if they could be identified early when they come to Sealdah. Especially before these newcomers start staying with some group and start getting guidance from the older children and enrolled into the norms of the group. The older children advise the newcomers not to reveal their real addresses.

specific efforts not to disclose any surname and be a part of all major religious events around the Sealdah Railway Station. The street children were not keen on performing any religious ritual, but these events provided them with an opportunity to earn more (both through donations and gifts given to them as well as theft and pickpocketing). They celebrated these occasions enjoying themselves in terms of the free food available at many religious institutions, watching new films of their favourite actors launched during these periods, and sometimes spending on having some special food that was not part of their everyday.

In the next section, I move on to discuss how homeless street children were treated as a category of 'outsiders' and 'non-normative' children by the world outside and how CISS understood and negotiated such processes of labelling and stigmatisation.

Stigma

Rastar meye, rastar moila **(girl of the street, dirt of the street)**

The relation of society to the everyday lives of CISS is rooted in extreme violence and indifference on the one hand and sympathy-based support on the other. This can be traced back to the 'public' nature of the street and a series of symbolic meanings of what is normatively permitted and is not permitted in this space. Often, the presence of CISS on the streets is seen as an obstruction to this space by the larger society. This pushes many children to be more mobile and further devalued in the eyes of the larger society while at the same time increasing their precarity (Rizzini and Lusk 1995; Rizzini and Butler 2003; Aptekar and Stoecklin 2014). In highlighting the uniqueness of the developmental life span of street children, research shows that once CISS begin to appear as adolescents, they are often seen as dangerous adults, as compared to being viewed as pitiful in their younger years (Aptekar and Stoecklin 2014: 53-54). This can be traced back to the dissociation between a normative notion of childhood and the autonomy/independence of small children. Consequently, younger CISS are viewed as dependents despite their financial independence. Once they are seen as transitioning into adolescence, the economic options afforded through a normative societal imagination of CISS being dependent, become scarce. For instance, while younger children can beg, adolescents often cannot, thus pushing them towards theft or as

intermediaries for drug dealers and sex work or what is referred to as 'career of deviance' (Becker 1963). This has led to the viewing of CISS as deviants and 'outsiders', in opposition to the rule-abiding or the mainstream society.

In Sealdah, the street children were referred to as '*chor*' (thief), '*baaje chhele*' (rogue boy) or '*rastar moila*' (dirt of the street) by most commuters, especially if they were seen to be not very young. The younger ones were still shown some sympathy as being orphaned and having been lost, but the attitudes of commuters change to one of suspicion and intolerance as these children grow older. One of their main sources of material earnings for the street children was through '*gari khonja*' (searching through train compartments) for leftover and forgotten materials by the passengers. Such practises, as street children combed through compartments using a broom or went searching from one compartment to the other as the long-distance trains pulled into the station, reinforced in the mind of commuters that street children were not trustworthy and responses of 'be careful with your luggage now', 'keep an eye on your purse', or even closely following the actions of the street children were visibly present among the commuters and recognised as such by the street children. Though this kind of labelling was done mainly for male children, even girls were commented upon as being no less than boys in these matters in a derogatory way—both by commuters and other stakeholders like the GRP RPF, police, and shopkeepers around the station.

The relatively older female children, in addition, were often referred to as '*rastar meye*' or '*nongra meye*' (girls of the street or dirty girls) with the implicit and often explicit implication that they were sex workers and readily available for sexual pleasures of those around the station. This perception was strongly present in the responses and attitudes of both commuters and other neighbouring respondents, such as local shopkeepers and the police. The girls, themselves, were extremely aware of how they were seen by 'others' and, as one of them shared, "*Amake loke nongra meye bolle khub kharap lage. Amake niye phurti kore jor kore. Bole tui to emnite i ghanta. Tor abar lojja ki re?*" (I feel extremely hurt if people call me a dirty girl. People enjoy my body forcibly. They say that my body is already used, and thus I should not be ashamed of sexual insinuations).[14] The perception of other stakeholders of the older girls being sex-workers, added

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[14] Fieldnote Date: 10th August 2014.

on to the already existing labels that these girls also carried of being *as* unprincipled as the boys; as one of the local shopkeepers shared, "*bhebo na ei meyegulo chheleder theke kichhu kom, erao churi sab kore*" (Do not think that these girls are anyway lesser than the boys, they also steal and do other such things).[15]

There were contradictory responses to such labelling between boys and girls, and often these responses differed for girls across different ages. Boys were seen to reinforce the labelling and took pride in being regarded as dangerous. They often said, "*amader beshi na ghantanoi bhalo*" (it is better not to mess too much with us) or "*amra kintu khhatra maal*" (we are dangerous things).[16] At one level, this probably enabled them to deal with the labelling and the everyday realities of their lives that mapped onto the categories through which they are labelled. At another level, the posturing of aggressive and reckless masculinity formed part of the social order among street children (as discussed earlier). Such posturing helped the male children avoid unnecessary physical or sexual abuse from peers and other stakeholders and also make claims to higher-order positions within their groups (see Chapter 4). Most girls, however, desired to portray a self-image that contradicted popular perceptions about them, and even expressed that they felt humiliated for being called '*rastar meye*'. Consequently, they work towards being tagged to one of their male counterparts as the boy's close friend, girlfriend or wife, and felt more secure in such relationships. Even among street children, these relationships, often short-lived with a single male partner, were accepted as being that of a 'good' girl compared to a girl who was not with a partner and thus considered 'available'. For most girls, and among CISS in general, patriarchal conventions from larger society were thus reflected in their perceptions and behaviour.

Such a reflection of patriarchal conventions in the everyday lives of CISS was also observed in how another particular behaviour of girls was looked down upon as bad or inappropriate among the CISS themselves. Smoking, and the gesture of exhaling smoke, were considered as a prerogative of boys, and girls who smoked were looked upon as '*baaje meye*' (bad girls) even among street children, both boys and other girls. Interestingly, female children's inhalation of substances and consumption of tobacco-based products such as '*gutka*' (a form of chewing tobacco) was considered acceptable. When I probed this further, it became apparent that

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[15] Fieldnote Date: 13th August 2014.
[16] Fieldnote Date: 16th August 2014.

the gesture associated with smoking, inhalation and exhalation with a certain lack of inhibition was deemed to be inappropriate for girls, with the gesture related to and associated with a form of performative masculinity among the street children.

It is not as if all girls aligned or attempted to align with a socially acceptable 'good girl' image. A few older girls strategically used their image of being sexually attractive ('*sexy maal*') with the RPF and police to seek protection from unwanted advances from other men. As one of these girls shared, "*Orao to lochhami kore. Kintu bakider theke chhara paoya jay. Ar nijer o dor bare. Onek jinish paoya jae*" (They [the RPF and police] also ogle and misbehave, but it helps us get relief from other men. Our value also gets increased. We get more things).[17] As many of these girls often moved into circles of more organised sex work – the bank plot area around the station being known as a place for soliciting clients – they also adopted the language, postures, and signalling mechanisms of the organised sex workers.

Another form of posturing was resorted to by CISS when dealing with stakeholders like NGO members. In such instances the children took to posturing to indicate they were aligning with the images of normative children that the welfare schemes of these NGOs wanted to cast them in. When discussing with the children, they said they adopted this tactic to gain benefits from the NGOs as and when required but preferred to stay out of the ambit of the formal mainstreaming agendas of their programmes as they felt that these programmes did not align with their needs. NGO staff said that many children who they thought had been mainstreamed, especially with earlier facilities like hostels available for street children, dropped out of their programmes. This was also one of the reasons that funding agencies and NGOs had moved away from such a strategy of high investment in infrastructural facilities for street children, which also implied a high per-head cost for mainstreaming street children.

For both female and male street children, besides strategic posturing to avoid more violent forms of abuse or to gain material benefits without compromising what they regarded as a sense of freedom, consumption of drugs and inhalation of substances were observed to be a means of coping with the 'social outcast' nature of their position in larger society. The function of the usage of inhalants by CISS has been defined by two categories– the collective function and the individual

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[17] Fieldnote Date: 25th November 2014.

function. The former includes playfulness, provocation and contestation, ritual and identity function, while the latter includes physiological, reduction of inhibitions and hedonistic functions. Children aim to garner a collective identity through the collective nature of the first set of functions, whereas the latter addresses the child's individual needs (Lucchini and Stoecklin 2020). These practises, as many of my respondents shared, helped the children to avoid continuous pangs of hunger and lack of enough food on the one hand, and forget the exploitation, abuse, and neglect of the larger society that they faced every day on the other hand. They also thought of these practises as binding them together as a group against the indifference of the rest of society. Street children were quite explicit in recognising the exploitation they were subjected to by external circumstances and how 'others' took advantage of their precarious everyday lives. As they often said to express their belief that they had a more honest outlook on life than the rest of society—"*Amader jeta mone setae mukhe; ora mukhosh pora*" (what we have in our minds is what we say, the others wear masks).[18]

I tried to probe into their self-perceptions about their non-normative activities and engagement. Though very few were willing to share about this, the few who did so conveyed a keen sense of awareness of the self-destructive nature of the pathways available to them as CISS and that they had embarked upon. The thought of a probable short lifespan "*beshidin banchbo na toh amra*" (we won't survive for long) was strongly present in their reflections on their own lives.[19] When asked about this, the children, both girls and boys, pointed out the lived realities of deaths of street children around them – from suicide, ill-health, train accidents, drug overdose, and so on. One particular incident (that happened just before my fieldwork started) was cited by these children to underline how death at a young age was almost inevitable for them, even if their lives were aligned to the mainstream through other efforts. This was about Indro, a 23-year-old who had been a street child earlier, had then gone on to complete his graduation with the support of an NGO, and had a steady work engagement and income with the NGO. Very popular among his peers and the younger children among the CISS, and even admired within the NGO circles, Indro remained close to the street children and frequented their hideouts, as the freedom of such a life seemed to be something he also missed (as shared by my respondents). With Indro suddenly committing suicide, most of the street children I could speak to about their future hopes and aspirations observed that

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[18] One of the Fieldnote Dates: 20th December 2014.
[19] Fieldnote Date: 8th December 2014.

this double bind of freedom, from being on the streets, and possibility of a mainstream life, through institutional rehabilitation efforts, would forever plague their future; and this they thought, in one way or the other, would be hard for them to reconcile. The street children, thus, thought that these opposing pulls and pressures were an inevitable part of their lives which would not allow them, despite social mobility options that were opened to them, to negotiate the conflicting choices and norms of their street lives and that of a socially and normatively more acceptable life trajectory in any unambiguous manner.

Subculture

The Street Pulls Us (Rasta amader taane)

More popularly, and in the imagination of the general population, street subculture has been characterised as 'deviant' and observed to be marked by petty crime, violence, drug addiction, and prostitution (Dabir and Athale 2011; Aptekar and Stoecklin 2014; Lucchini and Stoecklin 2020). However, qualitative studies show that these very same activities constitute the survival strategies of street children and also reflect both their resilience in the face of adverse external circumstances and assertion of ways of being that distinguish them from more accepted cultural norms of the larger society. Studies have shown that such activities include tattoos, piercing, hair styles, and other physical modifications that are regarded as counter-culture to the mainstream (e.g., Davies 2008). While some of these activities reaffirm counter-culture trends within the mainstream, there are also instances where street children affirm and claim their street identities through deliberate dishevelled attire and looks, and practices such as drug abuse (e.g., Scheper-Hughes and Hoffman 1998). Overall, studies show that through their distinctive subculture, street children try to establish a counter-relation to the dominant society that often devalues them (see Beazley 2003).

In my study, the idea of *rasta* (the street), for street children, was observed to be not limited to only that of an urban infrastructural facility that criss-crosses the city and makes possible movement from one place to the other. In the sense that Lefebvre (1991) expands the meaning of space, and infrastructural and architectural constructs, as permitting certain ways of beings of specific actors and hindering that of other actors, for street children *rasta* embodied their everyday

lived realities, the choices that were made possible for them, and the symbolic meanings that they attributed to it. As Raja shared, "*Rasta ke bhalobashte hobe, nahole rasta te tikte parbe na. Rasta theke jete amader bhalo lage na*" (One has to love the street, otherwise one will not be able to last on the street. We do not like to go away from the street).[20] This sense of belonging to the street was not restricted to certain areas of the 'street'; rather, it was, for street children, an abstraction that offered a similar kind of freedom and way of life anywhere they were on the street. For example, though many of them primarily lived in the areas around Sealdah, they also expressed that they could live in any 'street' in any other part of the city or even another city. Alienated from the concept of 'home' as a protected institutional domain that they could return to, children did not symbolically invest the street with any such meaning of a protected delimited space.[21] Rather, the street for them was a social space *where* and *around which* everything – physical, material, emotional, and symbolic – took place.

For example, neither food, or clothing, nor shelter was readily available to or accessible for the street children. Their everyday life on the streets, and what it afforded, made possible these necessities of life for CISS. For the street children, the trains, and the areas on the platform, along the car shed, and outside the railway station, bore in their imagination a sense of space similar to that of the street. '*Garikhonja*' (searching trains) was one of the main sources of the daily earnings of street children, both in terms of money and in kind. Many of them got up on the train when the train passed the car shed, as its speed reduced there, before reaching the main station. These children started stealing or collecting things by taking advantage of the passengers' rush, carelessness, and anxiety to get down from the train. After the passengers got down from the train, the children started collecting the items left behind by the passengers, which they usually sold for money. Besides buying food with their earnings from such sources, Koley Market was another space that ensured food for the street children.

Activities in Koley Market, a wholesale market around five kilometres from Sealdah, started quite early in the morning, even before 4:00 a.m. Street children, in small gangs, formed teams to unload the fruits, vegetables and other wholesale provisions arriving in this market, with

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[20] Fieldnote Date: 10th January 2015.
[21] Most of the children hardly had contact with their biological families and many of them came from dysfunctional families and faced family violence before leaving their biological families.

the entire exercise of unloading being completed by 6:00 a.m. The local police and shopkeepers were complicit in this poorly paid work done by underage children. During such observations, I was advised by the local police station to maintain a distance from the ongoing activities. In '*falpatti*' (fruit market) in Koley Market, fruits arrived in trucks and were packaged in '*tukris*' (a packaged version having two '*jhuris*', i.e., bamboo baskets) or in cardboard carton boxes. During unloading, some children passed entire '*tukris*' or carton boxes to children of the group who were not involved in the unloading but helped to keep these boxes aside for later consumption by the group members. If they failed to pass the whole '*tukri*', the children involved in the unloading chain also pushed their hands inside the '*tukri*' or carton to bring out some quantity of fruit and give it to the other children.

Street children also worked as temporary help in the roadside hotels and canteens near the station and the nearby N R S Hospital. Besides their earnings from this work, where they were primarily involved in cleaning the place and washing utensils, the children were often given food that went waste every day. They consumed any such cooked food themselves, while if raw rations were provided these were re-sold to local street dwelling families at a cheap rate. Another food source for children were the domestic helpers who worked in the buildings near Lebutala Grounds, Santosh Mitra Lane. Many of these buildings were used for organising programmes like marriage functions and death ceremonies. These domestic workers collected waste food from these rituals and ceremonies and sold it to street children at cheap rates.

Like access to food, access to shelter for street children was also insecure, and their hideouts changed at frequent intervals and depended strongly on external circumstances. During the predominant period of my fieldwork, children used the station premises – mainly the corners of the railway platforms, inside the train compartments that were kept overnight in the car-shed, and the space beneath the Sealdah water reservoir, as shelters for the nights. There were designated spaces that children considered 'safe' as shelters, and this depended more on their perception and experience of non-intrusiveness from other stakeholders, including other groups of street children, in these spaces. Interestingly, the official 'shelters' for the street children run by the NGOs were not considered to be among these 'safe' spaces and were more used as places that provided access to food and other facilities during the day. The idea of an 'open' space as providing a sense of freedom was visible in these observations and what the children shared about their idea of a 'safe'

space. When children shared about their idea of a 'safe' space, what they attempted to convey was a place from where they could escape whenever they wanted to ("*amra jaate ichhe holey paalate paari*"). The notion of shelter was closely linked to the idea of 'safety' from different forms of intrusion and violence, be it from police, NGO staff, or members of other street gangs. In what seemed an extension of this ambivalence of 'closed spaces' being 'safe', and the sense of freedom associated with open spaces, even girls who had established some relationship with 'surrogate families' (Stephenson 2001), preferred to not stay in the homes of these families and stay outside.[22]

The street children also exercised a sense of freedom related to non-essential necessities even within the structural constraints that they found themselves in. For example, the children were conscious of branded products for their attire. Though they did not have access to branded originals, they made it a point to find out about places where they could access and procure at cheap rates such fake branded clothes ('*chhaant maal*'; leftover pieces from fake of originals, basically cheap imitations of styles and logos of upper-end lifestyle brands). The children, especially the female children, used these dresses when on special outings, such as going for a film screening or going out for food to a hotel with their partners. Similarly, while they did not have access to good quality, hygienic food, the children often boasted about the access they had to a diverse range of food items through leftovers in food stalls and hotels. Earlier, they had access to leftover food from train catering services that was sold to them at heavily discounted rates and even arrangements with local shopkeepers to pick up items for which expiry dates were over. When I asked the children about the health implications of having these products (especially the packaged ones whose expiry dates were over), they said that this was only to fool people like us and get us to buy more and more and that these items were perfectly okay even after their expiry dates.

The emotional lives of the street children, like many other aspects of their everyday lives, connected strongly to their peers on the street. The expressions '*bondhu*' or '*dost*' (meaning friend) was used often in their everyday expressions and narratives to refer to their peers. It was not as if everyone was a close friend or even considered to be among close friends, with most of these friendships having only a short lifespan. However, even within this everyday lived reality of peer-

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[22] As a number of studies with street children have shown, they tend to adopt surrogate family members in and around the neighbourhood for various reasons.

to-peer bonding that was transient, the expression '*bondhu*' was used almost rhetorically to express a belief that the peer(s) referred to would not leave the friend, particularly in times of distress or need. As Rahim said, "*ekhane sobai bondhu bole tai ami-o boli*" (here everybody calls the other friend, so I also do the same). Yet another among them shared, "*bondhu bolle mone hoy amake chhere jabe na*" (I feel that if I call my peers friends, they will not leave me).[23] While this was common among male and female street children, female street children also expressed that they felt 'safer' if they were seen attached to a particular male child at any point in time. They shared that this somehow reassured them that they would be in a position to be 'used' ('*byabohar kora*', indicating sexual insecurity) to a lesser extent by others. These relationships too were transient, with a periodic change of partners. Even with surrogate families, female children would express a sense of safety with a particular member of the family with whom they had a surrogate relationship and not with all the family members. As most children operated in small groups/gangs (see, Chapter 4), another sense of safety that street children derived was from the leaders of their groups. So, invoking names of their leaders to indicate that they were connected to these children who had more widespread influence within the larger street children community, was quite common. Surprisingly, children seldom expressed a sense of safety with the formal institutional caregiving system or its representatives, including staff of NGO shelters or the law enforcers around the station.

The sense of safety and security, with designated places that street children had earlier, was observed to change a lot since 2016, and more visibly so since 2018. This was because of the policy efforts to make railway stations free from street children. In more recent times, I found street children going to the neighbourhoods near Sealdah (example, Koley Market) or neighbouring stations along the train routes from Sealdah (example, Park Circus, Dumdum) to seek shelter for the night. Though a few night shelters of NGOs were available for street children on Rafi Ahmed Kidwai Road and even two on the railway platforms in Sealdah (North) and Sealdah (South), both boys and girls avoided these shelters, as substance-use that they are addicted to was prohibited there. However, during emergencies such as heavy rains and waterlogging in their designated shelters and during elections or other specific occasions when police vigilance became tighter on the streets, some girls tried to avail these night shelters depending on vacancies

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[23] Fieldnote Date: 16th February 2015.

available in these shelters. Surprisingly, NGO staff working with these children did not seem to cognise this sense of safety that street children associated with designated places, displacement from which caused them anxiety and insecurity. These staff responded, "*ora toh aageo rastate chhilo, ekhono rastae achhe*" (the street children were earlier on the streets, now also they are on the streets).[24] That street child could also experience a sense of safety and security, and thus, a sense of displacement from what NGOs and their staff considered as precarious living arrangements, was probably not embedded in the understanding of the welfare schemes and programmes or the understanding of the people involved with these programmes.

Overall, the sense of safety and security of street children did not seem *strongly* associated with their perception of physical violence or the precarity of their everyday lives, though these were important considerations. CISS, more or less, took the presence of everyday violence in their lives as an inseparable part of their lived realities. What mattered more for them was a sense of reciprocity through a rhetorical use of the expressions '*bondhu*', '*jigri dost*' (best friend) with their peers; peers and relationships that the children understood as being transient, but at the same time believed were not based only on instrumental needs and were founded upon a reciprocal expectation and demand for the 'other' being present in times of need. The transient nature of these relationships affected girls more than boys, though both were aware of the impermanence of their companionships based on their experiences on the street. Thus, street children seemed to be more invested in an imagination of friendship based on reciprocity, predominantly emotional. This imagination, rather than a strong dependence on continued relationships with significant peer members, provided CISS with an emotive and symbolic space of security,

The peer group also served as a sort of boundary condition regarding how street children perceived so-called normative adult-child relationships. They seldom looked up to adult stakeholders they regularly interacted with for any form of guidance or advice. These stakeholders included designated caregivers such as NGO staff and petty shopkeepers, lorry drivers, hotel owners, and even drug peddlers. Though a sense of work-related trust was often present in these relationships, especially those involving illegal activities such as buying and selling of stolen items and drug selling, adults in these relationships were looked upon sceptically for any 'personal'

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[24] Fieldnote date: 5th April 2015.

advice that children needed in their lives. Instead, older members from among the gang or more experienced peers were relied upon for advice.

The nature of their engagement with these stakeholders might be one strong reason for such relationships of adult-child mentorship to not emerge. First, street children had multiple sources of daily income and were not restricted to some regular engagement with one particular work or a single stakeholder. Second, they treated these means of earnings as a way of day-to-day survival rather than with an idea of a long-term career or work trajectory. However, there was an exception where the adult-child relationship was seen to cohere with a universal norm of childhood. This was in the desire of CISS for motherly affection.

Several street children without families, from my core sample, were connected to street children with families and homes. Intragroup friendships led to some of the children without families adopting their friend's mother as their own mother and referring to them as 'ma' (mother) in their regular conversations. A similar sense of surrogate relationship was sought to be established with other female caregiver figures in the family such as 'didi' (sister), 'dida' (grandmother), 'mashi' (maternal aunt) as compared to the male figures. Though such relationships for seeking emotional security were seen among both girls and boys, it was stronger for girls. This was probably because the boys had stronger material interests that preoccupied them than the girls. The street children were seen to find these emotional spaces as one of the sources of relief from the precarity of their everyday lives. In the conversations I had with them, the children often indicated that it would be difficult for them to live without these relationships and that they could do anything for these 'surrogate' caregiving family figures with whom they had established strong emotional bonds (see Photo 3.5). As a female respondent said in one of our discussions, referring to the friend of her mother who she had adopted as a surrogate mother, "*Ekhane amar ma ache je amake bhalobashe nijer meyer moto; amake khete dey, aador kore. Ami nijer jaan-er thekeo ma-ke beshi bhalobashi. Ma-ke chhere ami jaabo na*" (My mother who is here loves me like her own daughter; she gives me food and affection. I love her more than my own life. I will not leave her and go).[25]

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[25] Fieldnote Date: 24th February 2015.

After the eviction drives from the railway station, however, children seemed to show more dependence on relationships with other adult stakeholders who were part of their everyday sources of income. This was because they now faced an even more precarious existence when compared to their earlier situation. The inevitability, though not a self-motivated willingness, of recourse to some safe and continuous source of earning and shelter was sharpened in this process. The '*raela*' (sense of being carefree) that the street children used to boast of before the eviction drives became far subdued after these drives. A sense of nostalgia with this idea of being carefree, however, continued to be expressed by a few children, especially those who had enjoyed group leadership, and they expressed this by sharing how they would be able to, one day again, reclaim such spaces and times of being carefree—"*ekhon mene niyechhi, kintu pore dekhe nebo*" (We have succumbed now, but we will come to our own later).[26] Though the frequency and intensity of the presence of street children within the station premises reduced considerably after eviction and railway platform cleanliness drives, even then, children continued to access their networks. This they did by assuming postures of commuters, by dressing properly, buying platform tickets, and then resorting to earlier practises of petty theft and train searching when they were inside the platforms. These sites, more than just being spaces for exercising their instrumental competencies for ensuring daily basic necessities, seemed to serve a sense of freedom, as expressed earlier by children. As the children shared, in these spaces, they could still board any train and go to any place. The ability to travel across long distances without incurring any expenses appeared to enhance their sense of freedom – "*Amake badha deoar keu ney*" (there is no one to stop me).[27] There was, as discussed earlier, a gender-based difference in this attitude. Male children exhibited such a sense of freedom more explicitly, while female children showed more caution and preferred to tag along with the male children and reflected a sense of dependency on the male children.

Female children, particularly the relatively older ones, were sensitive about the views other stakeholders held about them, and expressed how they felt hurt and angry to be labelled '*nongra meye*' (literally dirty girl, but implying promiscuity), which they often were by commuters, local shopkeepers and even law enforcers. In such a context of perpetual stigmatisation, a male companion from among the larger group of street children was regarded positively by both female and male children. For the children, this implied an acceptance as what they called a 'lover'. Girls

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[26] One of the Fieldnote Dates: 20th January 2015.
[27] One of the Fieldnote Dates: 3rd March 2015.

often used blades to etch the name of their partner (lover) on their arms; this was a gesture to indicate a loyalty to the relationship. The make-believe marriages some of these relationships matured into were symbolically important for the children, especially the girls. The girl applied traditional markers of marriage like '*sindoor*' (vermilion dye applied on the forehead) and wore '*sankha*' (conch shell bangles) to show that she was 'married'. Though these relationships and 'marriages' were often short-lived, these symbolic elements in the lives of street children reflected how they made efforts to portray a conformity to the norms of the social world that they did not immediately inhabit and mostly held disparaging opinions about. During these short-lived relationships, the girls reinforced gender hierarchies that were prevalent in the larger society, as they tried to follow their partners wherever possible, bring food for them, and so on. Again, like their 'imagination' of a secure friendship and expectations of reciprocity in what were in reality short-lived friendships, these relationships of male-female partnerships had for street children a similar 'imagination'. While both the partners knew that the relationship in all probability would be short-lived, yet through their attire, gestures, and actions, the girls tried to convey a stable long-term partnership.

Even the inability to find a male companion or rejection by a male companion was rationalised by the older girls using a narrative of ideal love. The relationship between *Radha-Krishna* was invoked by the girls in such situations to justify that even if there was an explicit absence of acceptance of a stable relationship by the male counterpart they liked, there was a strong underlying relationship of unfulfilled love that in the girl's imagination bound them together. Several girls also kept miniature idols of '*Radha-Krishna*' and idolised this relationship in their narratives of love or failed loves.

There were no differences in values attached by the CISS to the different activities they were engaged in. That is, labour-based income-earning activities such as unloading fruits and vegetable baskets from lorries and helping shopkeepers or in hotels were not regarded by street children as normatively different from searching or stealing materials from commuters and drug peddling. What was, however, evident was their suspicion of and reluctance to engage much with those among them who earned considerably more than the rest of the CISS. As one of them shared, "*jaara khhub kamae taader saathe beshi mishi na*" (we do not mingle much with those who earn

a lot).[28] Implicit in this was their belief that those who earned significantly more were deeply embedded in illegal activities, and it could be dangerous for them to be involved with these children. An uncertainty and fear associated with the nature of serious illegal activities served more as a deterrent in these instances rather than any perceived normative difference between legal and illegal activities that the CISS were involved in. Rather, among children, betrayal in any activity they were engaged in together was considered normatively unacceptable and treated with severe punishment.

Discussion

This chapter raised questions about the issues of identity, stigma, and subculture in the everyday lives of homeless CISS. The analysis from my fieldwork showed that the identities of these children do not adhere to socially dominant ascriptive categories of caste and religion. However, for other stakeholders, the identity of street children acquired a similar nature as these ascriptive categories. The location of street children on the streets became a 'marker' of immanence without attention to the structural origins of this location or any belief in the hope of social mobility through welfare interventions. Indeed, the children also reinforced this sense of immanence in terms of the ways they dealt with the stigma associated with the ideas of '*rastar chhele/meye*' (children of the street – male/female). However, among street children, internal group dynamics allowed a form of the fluidity of their nominal identity. This fluidity had connections with the male children's presentation and practises of masculinity that are valued for survival on the streets and reflect mainstream popular media representations of such masculinity. Female children, on the other hand, were observed reinforcing gendered practises by assuming names suggested by their male partners. This presentation of self, where a negative self-image was often reinforced but also contested and challenged through alternative presentations in different contexts, resonates with Erving Goffman's work in *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman 1978). The ways in which street children appropriated and negotiated multiple identities shows how agency is inherent in the ways CISS act out different versions of the self that is both true (i.e., structured and

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[28] Fieldnote Date: 22nd March 2015.

determined by external conditions) and contrived (i.e., strategic in ways to negotiate specific interactions with others).

What this chapter also revealed was that labelling of CISS by other stakeholders as 'children of the street' contains a suspicion of non-normative childhoods and casts these children as social outcasts. The stigmatisation of CISS through such labelling draws on multiple attributes of a child being on the street that are regarded as discreditable, including inclination to petty crime, being untrustworthy, being socially useless, inclination to sexual activities at an impermissible age, inclination to prostitution, and needy of and engaged in substance and drug abuse. While the micro-level causes of stigma also draw our attention again to the work of Erving Goffman (1963), the macro-level causes seem to be ignored by the larger society. In a way, the negotiation of multiple identities by the street children appeared to be different responses to such stigmatisation. Male children were seen to make efforts to a posturing that broadly conveyed aggressive masculinity that, at one level, helped them to deal with the perils and dangers of street life, and at another level, supported the in-group social order that depended on such masculine attributes. On the other hand, female children were observed to be eager to adhere to social conventions of 'good girls' in terms of their relationship status, and also performed explicit displays of conjugal sustainable relationships, relationships they knew were inevitably short-lived. However, both female and male children also adopted strategic representation of themselves with other stakeholders like the police and NGO workers to serve their own survival, security, and sense of freedom.

Despite diverse strategic posturing, the overall reinforcement of the stigmatising identity of 'being from the street' (*rastar chhele/meye*) was noted to be a continuing part of the emotional world of CISS. This stigmatisation, as I will note in Chapter Five, also occurred within the context of programmatic interventions for the welfare of CISS and reinforced the same for CISS. Thus, a reproduction of the street identity continued to be a part of the everyday lives of street children, much in the nature of Bourdieu's conceptualisation of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Burawoy 2019). For Bourdieu, symbolic violence is "the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 167). In a manner similar to symbolic violence theorised by Bourdieu, CISS are subjected to non-physical violence in their characterisation and treatment as deviants, and despite contestations of such

stigmatisation, they also perceive such a characterisation as the normal order of society and the lives they believe they have chosen to lead.

However, a sense of freedom was also evident in the subculture among the homeless CISS. This subculture was seen to be defined primarily in and through the spaces they inhabit – the streets in and around Sealdah, and the possibilities of material security these spaces allow for. So, as opposed to a normative understanding of children and youth subculture, some form of labour was an integral part of their everyday lives, whether in the form of direct illegal activities such as theft and drug peddling or in the form of child labour (legally prohibited but a common phenomenon) in hotels, shops and the markets around Sealdah. Though a 'resistance subculture' as identified by cultural theorists such as Paul Willis (1977) was visible in the street life of the children, it was mediated by 'strategic opportunising' within this subculture (Maithreyi 2019). Thus, what was evident was both strategic agency of street children in making meaning of their adverse conditions and a sense of opportunism in the deployment and effects of this agency that was essentially constrained in terms of the structural limitations of their everyday lives.

Besides a sense of freedom, both real and rhetorical and symbolic, peer and surrogate relationships formed a vital component of the street subculture and conveyed a need for and fulfilment of a sense of security that was always at risk in terms of the lived realities of CISS. While any tangible sense of social capital that can complement any economic capital to make real differences in the overall economic or social well-being of the CISS was not present (Bourdieu 1986), these relationships among CISS were regarded as valuable social relationships that supported the children, sometimes temporarily and at other times at a more sustained level, as a form of social capital invested with both instrumental and symbolic meanings and purpose.

In the next chapter, I delve deeper into intra- and inter-group relationships among CISS and the role of trust within these relationships.

CHAPTER 4: THE ROLE OF TRUST IN AND BETWEEN SUB-GROUPS

Introduction

The previous Chapter examined the role of identity, stigma, and subculture among CISS. The labelling of CISS as 'non-normative' children was seen to be both reinforced and contested in terms of the children's beliefs, performative stances, and practises, though there were gender-based differences. The subculture of CISS in Sealdah station was observed to be strongly associated with both the material realities of the street and the symbolic space the street had in the imagination of the children. While the former provided the children with basic necessities of everyday life, the latter provided them with a sense of freedom, security, and relational ties. Peer-relationships played a significant role in terms of both this material and symbolic space. This brings me to my second research question: *What dynamics can be observed within and between sub-groups of CISS, and what role do these processes play in fulfilling basic material and emotional needs among CISS?*

Ideas of socialisation, solidarity, cooperation, group dynamics have been used to explain how members of sub-groups of street children establish strong relationships of bonding and also contest for scarce resources and territorial amenities that the street has to offer in the everyday lives of these children (Stephenson 2001; Volpi 2002; Ward and Seager 2010; Aptekar and Stoecklin 2014). For many of these processes, instrumental needs and work-related engagement of the CISS play a significant role. As Invernizzi (2003) shows, there are some patterns that seem to be common for street children that include induction to street work, initial subsistence efforts to learn required skills, and then developing a stronger sense of bonding with the group. This is sometimes followed by aspirations for work that pays more as the children start getting older. In the absence of the primary institutions of socialisation – the family – peers on the street, in terms of sub-groups the children are inducted into, become the means through which new children internalise the values and ways of being that constitute the street subculture.

In a similar manner, for street children without families, the family as an agent to build symbolic competencies for interpersonal relations is absent. Literature on street children identifies

and distinguishes two types of competencies among street children (Aptekar and Stoecklin 2014; Lucchini and Stoecklin 2020). The first are instrumental competencies, which are the skill-based visible abilities that the street children learn during the process of socialisation through their peers and start honing through their engagement in different types of activities in the sub-groups. The second are symbolic competencies, which are in the nature of intangible and invisible abilities that are key to coping mechanisms for the various types of emotional challenges and situations the children find themselves on the street. While the idea of 'solidarity' has been underlined in the existing literature with reference to this set of symbolic competencies (Stoecklin 2000; Lucchini 2007), in my own work I find the idea of 'trust' as a more relevant conceptual category to examine the different layers of association that can be found among street children, both within groups and between groups.

In the first section of this chapter, I outline the mechanisms through which children are socialised into life on the streets, which was seen to be different across different ages of children and also gender. The next section describes the nature of groups of children in terms of an implicit but unstable power hierarchy that prevails among the various groups I came across during my fieldwork. The third section elaborates on the intra-group dynamics among the CISS, while the next section deals with inter-group dynamics. In conclusion, I reflect upon the key research question outlined at the onset of this chapter.

Socialisation

As compared to dominant ideas of socialisation of children, where primary caregivers are regarded as the most important actors in the process of socialisation of children into the cultural norms and values of the larger society in which families are located, for CISS, this took on a different process. The induction to the subculture of the street, including the skills, behaviours, values, and ideas that children needed for contending with the precarity of street life, was mainly learnt through small groups or gangs of children of which each child became a part. These groups were strongly male dominated, though sometimes with a few female members in each group. There were no instances of all-female groups that I came across or heard of during my fieldwork.

Not all children were inducted into these male-dominated street groups, which though not territorial, had a layered and shifting dynamics of power among them based on several different criteria. For example, very young children (two years or younger), mostly lost or abandoned, were handed over to the relevant authorities at the station if found by the groups of homeless CISS. There was also an expectation that the children should be able to take care of themselves at a minimal level, rather than be nurtured by other children in any sense of sibling-care or care of a younger one as would be generally the situation in a normative family environment. As the elder children shared, "*seba jotno korte parbo na*" (we will not be able to care for and nurture others).[29] Thus, even older children who had different disabilities – especially intellectual disabilities – were not accepted as part of these groups.

Induction into a group primarily meant adding to the strength of the group vis-à-vis other such groups on the street. Therefore, newcomers were questioned in great detail about their life trajectories and their reasons for coming to Sealdah and choosing to be on the street. This assessment included a subjective understanding of the group members of the ability of the newcomer to fend for herself or himself materially within a short time. Children who were ambivalent about their reasons, and did not, according to the other members of the group, exhibit strong resolve to adjust to the difficult life on the streets, were prodded to return to their homes and even helped to do so (see Chapter 3; Caselet 1). I never witnessed or heard of any instance where unwilling new children who had arrived alone at the station were lured into the groups by the already present CISS. Also, even NGO workers at the station acknowledged that existing groups of CISS were the first to notice any new child who was lost or had fled from home, and remarked that it would be a good strategy to have these groups help the NGOs identify such children early and start rehabilitation processes as soon as possible with these children.[30] My key respondent group and many of the other CISS also claimed that they had the ability to quickly identify new arrivals at the station and streets around, and also assess whether these children were lost, or had fled from home only temporarily, or had wanted to leave home for good.

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[29] Fieldwork Date: 11th April 2015.
[30] One NGO in Kolkata spoke of such a strategy that they had adopted earlier but seemed to also indicate that it had not been very successful, without offering specific explanations.

Though children who had arrived newly in Sealdah were inducted into the groups, after fulfilling required criteria of ability to add value to the group, even young children from among these were not taken care of by the older children in terms of an elder sibling relationship, or a typical adult-child relationship. Rather, there was a preparatory stage that involved close mentorship in street survival skills. This mentorship included helping the newcomers identify and participate in ways of earning through different activities (example, collecting leftover materials in train compartments; supporting unloading of lorries at Koley Market), showing them places to hide and take shelter if chased by law keepers or other groups, showing specific hideouts ('*thek*') of the particular group for night shelter and substance abuse, and so on. More importantly, these new children were advised and instructed to avoid specific places where they could get into trouble, who to talk to and who not to talk to, and what to tell specific stakeholders if accosted about topics they could be asked about by these stakeholders. The last was specifically of consequence as any indiscreet talk from the new children could lead to other members of the entire group being affected in negative ways. So, a certain degree of monitoring and supervision of the newcomers were carried out by other group members till these children were socialised into the codes, norms and specific practises through which the group carried out their daily activities.

Surprisingly, I did not observe or hear about any teasing of these young children, either as newcomers or during the induction process in the group, by the existing members. However, relatively older children (around 10 years or more in age) who were new to the street, were asked to demonstrate what they could do in terms of street survival skills, and often got teased by the others in the group, though this went along with a process of mentorship in ways similar to that of the younger children. The somewhat over-protection of younger children as compared to these children could also be attributed to the group wanting to retain that particular child in the group and not have another group lure him away; as they said, "*amra chokhe chokhe raakhi jaate onyo keu fuslaate na paare*" (we keep them under observation so that they cannot be lured away).[31] The elder children, on the other hand, were considered to have their own agency to take decisions of staying with or breaking away from a group, and so such kind of supervisory protection was not deemed useful for them.

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[31] Fieldnote Date: 28th April 2015.

Overall, in the mentoring process, it was also common enough to see more experienced children guiding the newcomers towards specific practices on which they could develop their skills, more than other required street skills. This was based on the disposition and abilities of the newcomer as the mentors saw and assessed them during the performance of different tasks. The well-being of these newcomers was considered important by the existing group members in a way that did not concern their financial contributions to the group but rather their ability to be safe and not get into trouble. As discussions with the children showed, this was more to do to with ensuring the safety of the entire group by ensuring the safety of each member of the group, with 'safety' connoting a sense of keeping the group and its members away from any form of trouble from law keepers and any unwarranted actions from other groups.

While the above was mostly about male children, the way of inducting female children into particular groups was quite different. Elder girls who were new were not approached alone by any single male member, and the willingness of groups to have specific girls in their own groups depended strongly on their sexual appeal in the opinion of the older male children, particularly those in positions of power, within the group. Therefore, the initial step was always taken in a group or with more than one male member approaching the girl, and sometimes existing female members were also roped in for these preliminary conversations. This was to avoid any expression of fear or outrage from the new girl, which in turn could get the group into trouble with the police, RPF, GRP, and even the passengers around the station. Once inducted into the group, there was more competition for sexual attention and favours from the new girls who were relatively older (and appeared to be in their adolescent years) among the older male children, with group hierarchies playing a part in this. I did not come across instances of homeless young female children (below 10 years of age) during my fieldwork, but when I asked some of the other male and female children, they replied that such cases were generally referred to the appropriate authorities as the street groups were unsure of how to induct them into the everyday realities of street life. This approach of street groups to younger children, which was clearly gendered, appeared to reflect the dominant material and emotional needs of the male-centric groups.

Types of Sub-Groups and Interactions with Other Stakeholders

The street groups were not identified by specific names or even called '*dols*' (the common word used for a group in Bengali). Rather, they were identified by the leader's name, and other members invoked the leader's name to establish specific group membership; for example, "*ami toh Nabab-er saathe kaaj kori*" (I work with Nabab; Nabab being the leader of a group).[32] The dominance of specific groups was seen to be determined by the number of experienced CISS that group had, and the extent of mutually beneficial relationship networks that the group had established with other important stakeholders such as police, GRP, RPF, local '*dadas*' (i.e., local power elites, where the power often derives from both connections with the ruling party and the institutional machinery of the State), and NGOs. The performative elements of this group to reinforce their dominance included not only seeking very explicit forms of help or support from these stakeholders but also assuring members of the group and others that if something untoward happened to a street child during the course of their work (e.g., if they were caught stealing), this group could easily extricate them from 'trouble' using their relationships with the relevant stakeholders (see, Box: 4.1).

Box 4.1: Leaders helping others to get out of trouble

Amar sathe jara thake oder case khete ami di na. Khaanki-der der sathe amar dosti ache. Ami jodi boli "e amar sathe achhe, chhere din", ora dhomke tomke chere dey. Kintu jodi boro case-e dhora pore, amake malkori gochhate hoy. Ami chhariye niye ashi karon ora amar sathe thake, amake biswas kore. Tachhara amar nam phate.

[Those who stay with me, I try to save them from getting involved with any tiff with the police. I convince the police to leave them as they stay with me. They generally scold them and finally leave them as I have a good connection with the police. However, if they get involved in some complicated case, I have to bribe the police. I do bribe them to save my boys as they live with me, they trust me. Moreover, my popularity also increases.]

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[32] Fieldnote Date: 10th May 2015.

Nabab; leader of a group; Date: *20th March 2015*

Ekbar amar songe hebby bawal hoyechilo uporwalader. Arre boss, ami jachhi nijer moto, oder chulkani holo. Bole kina amar kache maal achhe. Joto boli nei, kichutei shunbe na. Phatash kore lagalo gaale. Amar o motka gorom hoye gelo. Amio o khisti mere diyechhi. Byas, babu der gaye lege geche. Bole amake case debe. Tarpor dekhi amar guru (Nabab) chhute ashche. Karur kachh theke khobor peyechhe. Oi eshe sob samal dilo. Amio bhul mene nilam. Ki ar korbo. Guru boleche. Na korte pari ni. Ora-o khanekta royab dekhiye amake chhere dilo. Bole nehat Nabab bolchhe. Nahole case khaoyato amake. Guru chhilo bole oder khoppore porte hoy ni.

[Once, I had an ugly argument with the police. They accused me of carrying some illegal items and asked me to show them. I was not carrying anything, and I refused to do so. The police then slapped me. I also got angry and used curse words. Then they deliberately wanted to punish me. Nabab, after hearing this news from others, came running and solved the problem. I also had to say sorry as my leader told me to do so. Police also released me after scolding. They said they were letting me go as Nabab had requested them. Nabab saved me from getting into further trouble that day.]

Raju; a member of Nabab's group; Date: *23rd March 2015*

The relationship with other stakeholders mostly depended on reciprocal relationships of sharing or hiding information each was privy to, and their complicity in the various petty illegal activities that took place around the station, from unloading of lorries by young children where the police also received 'cut money' or a commission from the wholesalers, to the removal of items of value from accident victims or those left behind by commuters, and sharing of information on drug peddling depending on the benefits to be derived from such information sharing. The dominant groups, therefore, claimed that they were not to be treated lightly— "*amader ryela achhe*" (we have confidence and dominance), as they were privy to information that could get

other stakeholders into trouble. The belief that the other stakeholders would not harm them, or put them into trouble easily, was strongly associated with group belongingness as manifest in the networking abilities of the leader, rather than the individual charisma of other members in the group, and was invoked by saying "so-and-so is my *Guru* or *Dada*" (that is, by taking the name of the leader of the group who was the known figurehead for the other stakeholders).

For NGO field staff, the relatively dominant groups were important as informal satellite centres that could provide them early information about arrival and identification of newly lost or homeless children. There was a competition between NGOs in terms of target-fulfilment that this process served, as these groups were best placed to identify new children on the streets and platforms and point them out to the NGOs if they wanted to; in exchange, NGO staff members shared advance information about benefit schemes that the NGO was coming up with so that the group leader could be privy to that information and use this in his standing as a figure of leadership within the group. Local NGO staff, for similar reasons, would often share in advance with the group leaders information about the possibilities of a night raid by the government to pick up the children from the platforms and around the station and take them to residential facilities for the night. A similar relationship of sharing information, vital to some of the illegal activities that CISS were involved in, sustained linkages between the dominant groups and middlemen in and around the station who were associated with drug rackets and dealers in stolen goods. Both provided prior information about police whereabouts and raids as and when they got to know about these.

With these relatively dominant groups, two other types of groups of street children were to be seen. One was those groups that tried to gain a foothold as a more dominant group by replicating the strategies of the dominant groups, and often in adversarial relationships with the existing dominant groups. In such cases, other stakeholders like the police and NGO staff members used this knowledge for their own benefits, by sharing information selectively with each of these groups, and tried to maintain a sense of rivalry through which they could benefit in terms of work they needed to get done (e.g., have multiple options open for petty illegal activities the police were complicit in; use of multiple groups by the NGOs to get more information about new children and get higher enrolments for their welfare benefit programmes for target-achievement). The rivalry among these groups also spilled over into incidents such as sharing information with lawmakers of some illegal activity of one group by the other group members or by sabotaging mobilisation

drives of the NGOs for an event by luring away children from these events and, thus, showing up the dominant group tasked with the mobilisation in poor light. Besides this power-play among the relatively dominant groups, the other groups were those that preferred to stay out of this power-play among the groups, and maintained a sense of convivial relations with all, and often the members of these groups merged into the more dominant groups, losing their own identity as a separate group.

These dynamics among the various groups did not help build a united front among the groups except in the face of external pressures detrimental to all the groups. For example, after the eviction drives, the places they then occupied in the city (e.g., Santosh Mitra Square), accommodated members across group affiliations without any visible animosity among these children. Children reported that this kind of a united front among groups was also visible when there were unannounced raids by police and other authorities to transfer these children to juvenile homes in the past (though I was not a witness to these incidents).[33] Other instances when children did not care much about their own group affiliation and stood together were occasions when any of them faced a verbal or physical assault from the passengers or when their claims for pending daily wages were postponed or denied in the places where they took up petty daily work. In these cases, there were no efforts by the children to verify the truth claims or the appropriateness of the wrongdoing that one among them had faced; rather, the children shouted and fought together across group affiliations to defend the child who was under duress from stakeholders they considered to be 'outsiders'. Similarly, when a new petty shopkeeper occupied a child's place in the market for '*bhaaga deoa*' (where the children sold small quantities of vegetables or fruits obtained when unloading cartons from lorries or stolen from other shops), the children would unite to displace the shopkeeper and to assert their authority over that space. These squabbles were also sometimes instigated by the more regular shopkeepers who felt more comfortable with the small quantities that CISS had to sell compared to other petty shopkeepers who along the way could become permanent competitors for them. Finally, groups saw to it that they did not get into any severe altercation among themselves when any important event (e.g., visit by a minister or politician or any such VIP, and the associated distribution of materials for CISS, often organised on specific national holidays such as Independence Day, Republic Day, or Children's Day) was

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[33] This, though reported by many of the children, was not validated in conversations with NGO field staff or police who I spoke with. Neither could I access any specific newspaper reports around this drive.

organised. Any such alterations, on the one hand had negative repercussions for all CISS from the NGOs or police, and on the other hand bore positive benefits for all CISS if they maintained peace, with everyone getting access to the materials (food and other items) distributed on these occasions. Though, as I note later, friendship bonds were regarded and treated as stronger within groups, it was not as if '*bondhutto*' (friendships) among CISS were limited to intra-group members. They did have friends across groups, though the nature of mobilisation of these friendships and their implications were different from intra-group solidarities.

Intra-Group Dynamics[34]

Within the sub-groups, the leaders played a primary role in holding a group together. These involved various strategies adopted by the leader to create individual bonds with each group member and do so in selective ways. For example, the leader was observed to adopt a conscious strategy to allow different members of the group to take the initiative and a lead role for different activities (e.g., guiding the others while combing and trying to steal any misplaced goods from the train compartments; assuming the role of a carrier in drug deals through other middle-men attached to established drug-peddlers; mobilising group members for unloading trucks and monitoring the same), rather than allowing a single group member to assume the lead for multiple activities. This was to ensure that none of the other members were privy to the networks and connections that the leader had with different stakeholders. As a consequence, group-members had to be dependent primarily on the leader for most of the activities that comprised their daily lives, especially in terms of earnings and basic necessities. The leader, in turn, ensured that he maintained his connections with other important stakeholders (e.g., police, RPF, GRP; wholesalers in the markets; NGO staff; middlemen and established drug racketeers) regularly and reinforced his primacy in the scheme of different activities carried out by the group.

The leader, thus, was the central source of key information that the group could then use for their own benefit in multiple ways and ensured that he had correct and early information about events and activities that would benefit the group members and that he did not pass on wrong or

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[34] See Photo 3.6.

misleading information to the group members. A sense of instrumental trust was reinforced through this mechanism, with each member in the group making an effort to come close to the leader and gain his confidence so that he could be privy to the information the leader had. This was also with the hope that they would find a more important place in the overall activities of the group. In instances where group members got too close to other groups, the leaders tried to build a sense of distrust regarding the other group by either implicating this member in some incident where it would appear as if the other group had betrayed the member, or implicitly indicating that he knew of the secret dealings of the member. When adopting the second approach, the leader also used a more emotional nature of trust to weaken the resolve of any such member planning to move to another group (see Box 4.2). The leader, for using these approaches, obviously had to have quite close knowledge of what each member of the group was up to (e.g., who they had met, for who long and for what purpose), and this he ensured through a sense of distributed trust. This included both instrumental and emotional dimensions of trust that he maintained among group members, with no one member being fully aware of everything that the leader knew or wanted to get done. In a way, this ensured that each member tried to show a trustworthy response by showing loyalty to the leader in their individual capacities and keeping a watch on other members in the group. It was not as if the trustworthiness of the leader himself was always taken for granted in this relationship between other members and the leader. When discussing the dynamics within the sub-group, other group members sometimes shared that they were not fools and did not trust their leader blindly, but also followed the leader to try and ensure that the leader did not short-change them in terms of the deals he struck for various activities the group carried out.

Box 4.2: Emotional dimensions of trust

Gurur jaadu thakle bairer keu chuglibaji korte pare na. Guru'r signal-e shob dhora pore. Kauke bagrabai korte dekhle daana chhente dey. Guru emon sentu dey je aar photorphotor korte paare na. Maane Guru bole je "Dekhbo toke ke dekhe dorkare. Ekhon onnoder sathe ghurchhis, thik ache, case khhele bujhbi. Tobe ami toke tokhon-o dekhbo kaaron toke ami dil se pyaar kori." Sentu hoye giye tokhon ar onnoder kachhe jae na.

[If the leader has charm/magic in his personality, then there are fewer chances that an outsider can break the group. For example, the leader has a very good network and thus can get information about boys/girls who have been closely interacting with outsiders (members of another team). Then the leader often puts emotional pressure by saying, "Now you are roaming around with others. I will see who will take care of you in times of need. When you face a difficult situation, you will realise. Though I will always be there for you as I love you wholeheartedly."]

Raja; group member; Date: *5th April 2015*

However, many group members also conceded that they had received unconditional instrumental and emotional support from the leaders in certain circumstances, for which they felt very grateful. For example, leaders were always supportive when group-members took ill. During these times he guided other members on how they could be of help and ensured that the sick member was taken care of in terms of food, and whatever support the others could arrange for (see Box 4.3). In these cases, as one child said, "*gurur saathe somporko kaajer baire*" (the relationship with the guru/leader was beyond one limited by work relations).[35] Overall, instances of intra-group betrayals were observed to be low, as each one of the group members knew that their survival on the streets depended on each other, with a strong role played by the leader in the processes of survival.

Box 4.3: Unconditional Support of Leaders[36]

Chintu, a 12-year-old boy, shared how the leader of his group, Jeet (a 14-year-old boy), took care of him when he was ill. This was when one of Chintu's legs got severely injured and he could not walk at all. Jeet took good care of Chintu during that time. Chintu had not even had to ask Jeet for help. Jeet spontaneously came forward to help Chintu. Jeet, along with other members of the group,

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[35] Fieldnote Date: 30th May 2015.
[36] Fieldnote Dates: 11th May 2015 to 22nd May 2015.

carried Chintu to the hospital for treatment. Jeet used his influence as a local street group leader so that Chintu could get treatment on an urgent basis in the Outdoor department of the hospital. Chintu recalled how Jeet used to insist that he eat well during the recovery period and arranged for food to be provided for him, either arranging it himself or through other group members. Jeet especially tried to arrange fruits for Chintu to get proper nourishment and get well as early as possible. Jeet also ordered the group members to take care of Chintu and to give him his medicines on time. Jeet himself bought the medicines and other necessities for Chintu. Jeet kept Chintu in a safe place behind the hospital where people would not disturb him, or the police would not force him to move. Jeet also ensured that the place was clean to avoid further infection. Jeet also made a crutch with branches of trees so that Chintu could stand or move slowly as and when needed. Even when Chintu was feeling extremely low as he could not move for quite a long time (almost 15 to 20 days) and did not have earnings without contributing to the group activities, Jeet gave him INR 100 to make Chintu happy. Jeet's gesture touched Chintu. According to Chintu, "*Kali Ma'r dibbi kheye bolchhi, ami guru's jonyo jaan dite paari. Amake guru jebhabe dekhe rekhechilo ami kokhono bhulbo na*" (I can even die for my leader. I will never forget how he had taken care of me).

Besides adopting various strategies of instrumental and emotional dimensions of trust to maintain his dominance within the group, and even within the context of a distributed trust among the group, the leader also consciously tried to have a specific group member as second-in-command. This was typically someone who had been with the leader and the group for a significant amount of time and participated in many of the activities directly with the leader. As the leader was not always around, the second-in-command was expected to keep the group together and group activities in the former's absence. There were a few instances, as children shared, of such second-rung leaders gaining popularity and control over the group members during a course of time, leading to breakaway groups with group members getting distributed in terms of allegiance to the two leaders. However, I did not encounter such incidents across the groups I interacted with or with the core group I followed more intensively. These instances seemed rare even in terms of

reported incidence as the children were observed to be more interested in group stability where assurance of various earning options and regular daily earnings, protection from harm from perceived others, and fulfilment of entertainment needs by the leader were valued much more than the instability associated with a transition from one group to another. When I asked them about this, the children indicated that they had developed an awareness very early in their lives on the streets that the material conditions and group dynamics did not differ much from one group to another. A steady place in one particular group they had gotten adjusted to was regarded by them to be a better option than trying to shift to other groups that would offer almost similar material benefits and where the intra-group dynamics would also remain quite similar. Also, as many in-group activities were not done alone but with specific partners, the children developed their own set of cues and signals to better understand each other and carry out these activities smoothly and safely. The children valued this and did not want to re-learn and re-adjust to a new group environment in terms of these in-group partnerships.

Material needs formed a large part of the life on the street and group activities, and the mechanisms that went into achieving these material needs – '*chhoka*' (planning), '*bhagabhagi*' (allocation of share of earnings), and '*chalaan kora*' (related to transfer or depositing of stolen or illegal items) defined the nature of interactions within the group. The word '*biswas*' was widely used among CISS, with specific reference to these everyday activities on the street and the nature of intra-group relationships. Though the word can translate into 'faith' or 'belief', this was used among CISS to refer to the relationships of trust and distrust through which intra-group relationships were made. The salience of this word and its rhetorical use among the children is best captured by the following, "*Biswas na kore ekhane tike thaka jabey na. Biswas achhe bole mone hoe gondogol hole bondhura dekhbe*" (Here, one cannot survive without trust. Trust gives a feeling that friends will help if something goes wrong).[37]

One way of understanding intra-group relationships was through the nature of work allocated to specific members within the group in terms of risk element. In an obvious manner, risky work meant higher returns or earnings and a higher proportion of allocation of returns to the child undertaking such activities. CISS referred to the activities or work that had either a high

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[37] Rani; a group member; Date: 28th April 2015.

probability of them getting caught by lawmakers or a high probability of accidents or death as *case khayoya kaaj* (case referred to instances of high risk or trouble, and this translated into any work that involved such risk). For example, getting onto incoming trains much earlier, when they were still moving at some considerable speed, and peddling of drugs, both qualified as *case khayoya kaaj*. Such tasks were generally undertaken by only those group members who were relatively close to the leaders, and if the work involved more than one member, the other partners would be *jigri-dosts* (very close friends who could rely on each other). As most activities under this category involved internal signalling mechanisms and close coordination among those involved, group members preferred to stick to the same partners they had successfully performed such activities with over time. This was so even when these partner-teams within the group had had a tiff or quarrel over something. As one of the group members, Raja shared, "*Aamar bondhu ki korbe puriaa bechte gele aami thik jani. O-o jaane. Aamader modhhe jhogra holeo aamra ei kaaj ta kokhono onnoder sathe kori na*" (I know what my friend will do (i.e., signal/expect of me) while selling substance packets. He also knows that about me. Even if we quarrel, we will not sell drugs with anyone else).[38]

Besides risky activities, there were non-risky activities that required special skills. Stealing in a packed train was considered non-risky as the children could create a strong network in the packed train, fool the passengers, and often steal belongings quite easily. However, within the implicit hierarchy of power in the group, as determined by closeness of members to the leader and the activities members could be entrusted with, these children were lower down in the hierarchy and needed special training from the more experienced group members before they were allowed to perform these tasks on their own.

Finally, there were the non-risky activities that did not require any special skills. Examples of these included begging; selling '*bhaaga*' (that is, selling of small quantities of fruits or vegetables, either stolen, or of low quality bought from retailers at discounted rates); collecting coins from the river (Hooghly in this case); collecting flowers from the flower market and weaving them and selling them as garlands; collecting, re-boiling and selling rice from canteens of railways and hospitals to poorer passengers and patients, and so on. These tasks were generally done by

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[38] Fieldnote Date: 6th June 2015.

those new to the group and who were regarded as '*bacchhas*' (literally babies, but here meant as newcomers or novices).

Though possession of particular skills mattered in terms of the intra-group hierarchy, across this hierarchy there was also a rhetorical use of '*biswas*' for any activity, instrumental or emotional, that the members engaged with each other. As Suraj explained, "*Dujoner modhhe aathaa thaka chai, noile kaaj tola jaabe na*" (There must be 'glue' to bond the members working together, otherwise it would be difficult to complete any job).[39] This sense of '*aathaa*' (glue) was a strong metaphor to emphasise the role of '*biswas*' in the everyday lives of children, for both instrumental and emotional needs.

Beyond the immediate group, this sense of '*biswas*' was also observed in the surrogate-family relationships that many children adopted. The following narrative shared by Rajen (a boy of 11 years) provided an elaboration of this:

> I do not want to remember my own [biological] parents. But here, in Sealdah, I considered a woman my mother. In fact, I used to call her "mother". She had her own children, but I thought she had also accepted me as her own child. I did everything she asked me to do, such as helping her husband in his work, washing her utensils, bringing money to her, and supplying her with substances for her addictions. I tried to show her that I had a lot of '*biswas*' in her. Though I knew that she might not trust me and love me as much as her own children, I tried to gain her trust all the time. I had the fear that she was just using me. Still, I pretended that I was not aware of her true intentions even to myself. I really wanted to call her '*maa*' and just feel that I had a mother. I always wanted to gain her attention. This had hampered my earning on the street with my group. My friends thought that I was getting money from '*maa*' and therefore I was not going for other work with them. Though I told them how I felt, they thought I was lying and started avoiding me. But '*maa*' often misbehaves with me and does not even respond when I call her '*maa*'. I still do not want to leave her.[40]

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[39] Fieldnote Date: 18th July 2015.
[40] Fieldnote Date: 10th June 2015.

In terms of peer-based emotional relationships, there was an ambivalence with the nature of '*biswas*' the children had for heterosexual relationships of intimacy.[41] This was for both male and female children, though the nature of expectations from these relationships and the nature of trust also seemed to be different across genders. As Junaid (a boy, 10 years of age) said, "I try to announce everywhere that Priya (a girl, eleven years) is my wife so that she cannot flirt with anyone else."[42] Another boy, Suraj (14 years of age), shared that even though he loved his partner, he felt delighted when other girls touched him or kissed him. At the same time, yet another boy Kaju was very conscious about proving to his partner that he was trustworthy through open displays of affection such as kissing his partner in front of his friends, holding hands with her, buying tickets for them to watch films together, and getting temporary tattoos in her name. Girls were more emotionally vulnerable in such relationships than boys (see Chapter 3) and expressed their sense of insecurity about this. Kareena (13 years of age) said, "Sometimes I have a feeling that he (my current partner) loves me and sometimes I feel he is maintaining some other love-relationship."[43] Thus, though the girls said that they trusted the boys, they continuously tried to resort to more visible forms of emotional display to define the boundaries of their relationship. For the girls, '*biye kora*' (getting married), '*sindur tola*' (putting on vermilion paste on the forehead as a sign of being married), etching names of partners with knives or razors on their arms, and calling their partners '*amar bor*' (my husband) loudly in front of others, were some such displays. As conversations with the girls revealed, these formed part of their efforts to get formal recognition as stable partners from the boys in what they also knew were inherently unstable relationships.

In the next section, I discuss the dynamics between children who belonged to different groups. On the one hand, there were no explicit norms that prevented interactions between children who belonged to different sub-groups, and children were often seen casually interacting with, having conversations with, and even playing with children of other groups. On the other hand, certain activities, including seeking shelter at night and sleeping, or indulging in addictive substances, or conveying of information related to material and safety needs of the group, were seldom done outside the group.

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[41] Though there were instances of same-sex relationships among the children, details about these were not shared by the respondents.
[42] Fieldnote Date: 24th July 2015.
[43] Fieldnote Date: 3rd August 2015.

Inter-Group Dynamics[44]

Different groups had different areas of operation and were often identified, by self or others, with reference to these areas. As Rahim shared, "*Amra taxi stand er chele. Eirokom kore amra onnoder o bujhe ni; jemon carshed er chhelera, go-down office er chhelera, folpatti te jara theke*" (We are boys of taxi stand. In that way we refer to other groups as boys of car-shed, boys of go-down office, boys who live in the wholesale fruit market).[45] While it can be assumed that there were implicit power differences between the groups, especially in terms of connection of group leaders to local power structures in different domains of their operations (e.g., wholesalers, lawmakers, NGOs, drugs and substances, stolen materials), these differences were not very apparent when I discussed this with different groups. Rather, what assumed importance was an accepted sense of how options of earnings and access to required resources would be distributed among the groups; this followed established norms among the groups, which in turn probably reflected the implicit power differences between the groups. The following example, given by Rajen, was indicative of these norms and dynamics, "AC3 of Rajdhani, S4 of Ranchi Hatiya belong to us. However, when we finish searching the train, anybody can enter and take things if they want." Specific trains and specific compartments were allocated across groups. Each group also had access to different types of trains, with long-distance superfast trains being regarded as more attractive in terms of opportunities to find forgotten items or to steal unattended items from passengers.

In appearance, there seemed to be a performative element of hostility between the leaders of different groups. Discussions with these leaders showed a tacit understanding among them about the information they would share with each other, but not with other members in their groups. This probably decided the distribution of access to resources, though this was not made clear in their conversations with me ever. Also, the precarity of life on the streets, in terms of scarcity of resources and the always looming threat of getting caught for illegal activities, created a sense of mutual dependency among groups, rather than a strong sense of competitive rivalry (see Box 4.4). Even though there were the occasional brawls and more violent street fights between groups (see

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[44] See Photo 3.7.
[45] Fieldnote Date: 2nd August 2015.

Box 4.5), the primary understanding among the groups, as the leaders themselves said, was, "*Amake phons korley ami korbo*" (I will hiss and bite only if the other party does so).[46]

Box 4.4: Solidarity Across Groups

Amar aar Nabab-er modhe bawaal achhe. Kintu ami oke ghenna kori na. O amake ekbar emon ekta khobor diyechhilo je ami jan e benche gechi. Tai ami or khhoti kori na. O jodi amake bole train chhere dite, ami chhere di. Amar chheleder bola ache je Nabab-er chhelera jodi Rajdhani ney majhe majhe, keu kichhu bolis na. Tobe Nabab-er mukh khub kharap. Tai or sathe amar bone na.

[Though I have issues with Nabab (leader of another group), I do not hate him. Once Nabab had given me some information that helped me save myself from a big problem. So I do not harm Nabab. I even let Nabab and his group search Rajdhani train, although my group has first authority on Rajdhani. I have told my boys not to get involved in fights with Nabab's team if they get up on Rajdhani once in a while when we are also there. Nabab has a foul mouth, that is why I do not get along with him]

Badshah; leader of a street group; Date: *4th May 2015*

Amader ekhane nijeder modhhe jotoi bawaal thak, bairer keu jodi amader ghantate ashe, amra sobai jhanpiye pori. Tokhon aar keu onno kichhu bhaabi na. Ekhane amader onek shotru. Sobai chae amra station chhere chole jai. Tai majhe majhe-i dhor-pakor hoe raate. Tai amra kichhu jante parle sobai ke bole di. Kokhono bhabi na ke kar sathe thake. Tokhon amra sobai rasta-r chele.

[Whatever issues we have between us, we do not let outsiders intrude in our issues. We are aware that people here want us to leave the station. There are often eviction drives at night to capture us

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[46] One of the Fieldnote Dates: 2nd November 2015.

to be sent somewhere else. So, whatever information we receive about these drives in advance, we circulate among all, irrespective of groups. Because all of us are then united as children of the street.]

Nabab; leader of a street group; Date: *10ᵗʰ May 2015*

Box 4.5: Brawl Between Groups

Bawal ekhane har-roz hoe. Ota to hojom hoye gechhe. Nijei shamle nite pari. Kintu jokhon dhamal hoe tokhon bondhuder laage, Guru ke to laagei. Jemon onnora jodi juti bendhe amake amar kajer jaygae eshe bagra dey, maane dhoro ami bhaaga dite boshechi amake sobai mile tule dilo aar sob jinish kere nilo, ami tokhon amar bondhuder niye lori. Guru-o songe thake. Eksaathe sobai mile oder upor chorle, ora aar panga ney na pore. Bojhe je amar pichone lej ache. Ami eka noi.

[Small fights happen here every day. That is normal, and I can handle them alone. But when big fights happen, I need my friends and my leader. For example, if another team attacks me jointly to push me out of my workplace (where I sit to sell vegetables/fruits) and snatch all items, I call my friends and my leader and attack them back together. Then they understand that I am not alone, and I have support from my team. Then they avoid harassing me further.]

Rahim; group member; Date: *18ᵗʰ May 2015*

One of the instances when fights between groups would break out was when a leader tried to rope in a member from another group who he considered would be an asset to the group in terms of a specific set of street survival skills that would benefit his group. In these cases, the leader tried to create a sense of distrust in the mind of this member for other members of the group of which the child was a part through the leader's own group members. If this process of luring away a member from another group came to be leaked to the other group, then there would be open fights.

Interestingly, if the process went as desired, the other group member had to prove himself to be a loyal member of the new group before he was entirely accepted and allocated important responsibilities. Also, any such street child who had switched groups often was not treated as trustworthy by the other group members, and only peripheral daily tasks were entrusted to this child.

Discussion

This chapter started with the question of what made up the dynamics within and between sub-groups of CISS, with these groups and their activities being a constituent element of the subculture of street life. In responding to this question, I explored the main stage of group formation, socialisation, and the nature of intra-group and inter-group relationships among CISS.

Induction into different groups was the primary mechanism through which new children who arrived in Sealdah were introduced to the subculture of the street. The precarity of street life and the capabilities needed to deal with this precarity were deemed important factors in deciding who all were included in the groups and who were not. While mentorship on processes and activities of street life led to the transition of the newcomers from novice apprentices to full-fledged active members of the groups, this mentorship process was different for younger children and relatively older children. The younger members, though not cared for or nurtured as siblings by the elders or more experienced ones in the group, were dealt with more patience, attention, and supervisory care than the older newcomers. The latter were often asked to prove their abilities much earlier in their process of induction into the group and full-fledged adoption as a group member, and even bullied by the existing group members. The gender-based differences in all street groups was also starkly visible with a predominance of male members and leadership positions always being assumed by male children. Perceived attractiveness and sexual interest were key determinants of induction of girls into different subgroups.

Like others have noted in previous studies, the socialisation trajectory of street children into the subculture of the street is akin to that of a career path that shows different stages of assimilation on the way to CISS being getting more and more deeply embedded into the street

environment (Visano 1990; Beazley 2003). In this study, what I also note is the way in which such career paths are gendered and also dependent on criteria of age and instrumental competencies that newcomers already have or are able to learn to complement the economic well-being of the entire group.

The power hierarchy among the groups was primarily dependent on leadership abilities in terms of networking appropriately with other stakeholders and accessing information regarding various needs – material, security-related. Though inter-group rivalry was not uncommon, what was interesting was the identification of members across groups as '*rastar chhele*' (children of the street). This was a symbolic source of unity when there was a general threat to the CISS. So, at one level, for the homeless street children in Sealdah, it was true that "Socialization to a subculture (…) help[ed] a young person redefine negative self- concepts by offering a collective identity and a reference group from which to develop a new individual identity, and thus face the outside world" (Beazley 2003: 109). However, when read in conjunction with issues of identity of street children that were observed in Chapter Three, at another level this was not entirely true for homeless street children in Sealdah, in terms of the very real effects of the symbolic violence they continued to face every day from different stakeholders.

What was also starkly evident was the dominance of the leader in how a group cohered around the different instrumental abilities and emotional strategies that a leader used to keep different members together, and also allocate work based on competencies of these members to carry out activities across a wide spectrum of risk levels associated with these tasks of daily survival. '*Biswas*' or trust formed a cornerstone for carrying out these activities and appeared to create solidarities within the group based on both material and emotional interests. Inter-group relationships had a performative notion of hostility reinforced by leaders, along with mutual adjustments over scarce material resources and information that helped different groups to survive the streets, despite occasional fights between the groups over group members switching groups and other issues.

In sociological literature, trust has been defined as a "state of favourable expectation regarding other people's actions and intentions" (Möllering 2001: 404). It has been observed to lay the foundation for individual risk-taking behaviour, facilitating cooperation and reducing social

complexity (Luhmann 1979; Gambetta 1988). Trust is central to the functioning of any social organisation. However, in the case of street children without families, the family as an institution to build trust among children in interpersonal relations is absent. In such a situation, the variability and multidimensionality of trust became a key emergent theme from my fieldwork. Sociologist Georg Simmel (1964) has argued that trust is not homogenous. Rather, for Simmel, it is a 'social form' that can be studied as constituting different social relations (Frederiksen 2012). The 'social form' of trust implies a sense of relationships and variability that constitutes trust, depending on the circumstance, and invoking the need to look at the 'intersubjectivity of trust'. Employing an intersubjective approach, Simmel pushes for evaluating the diversity of trust that is applied to different situations, objects, and social relations, thus moving away from its rational justifications. Intersubjective trust relies on experience and dispositions as an alternative way of understanding trust as opposed to economistic approaches of understanding trust more as an important asset that facilitates uncertain economic transactions (e.g., Coleman 1990; Putnam 1993). However, there are other economic theories that seem to align more with Simmel's approach. For example, Hardin (2006) proposes a belief-based approach to trust where trust is seen as a belief of the other's trustworthiness.

Thus, examining trust as a process, particularly in the case of street children, is vital to understand the role played by their past, present and future in shaping the development of reciprocal relationships of 'favourable expectations' with different stakeholders. This is made clearer when we examine the difference between trust and confidence. While both refer to expectations; the difference lies in how they are attributed. Whereas trust takes into account the risks involved in the decision-making process, confidence relies not on alternatives but on our expectations, or, as Simmel defines, confidence as a 'subsequent form of knowledge' (Simmel 1964). In Simmel's understanding, trust has an element of choice, whereas confidence gives over the agency of the individual involved, and the decision is no longer determined by 'choice'. In the way '*biswas*' was deployed among street children, this sense of agency was strongly evident, even though this agency was observed to be mediated by both instrumental interests and affective interests depending on the 'other' and the particular situation.

In the next chapter, I examine how the ideas and actions of the State and non-State actors (mainly NGOs) approach the everyday lives and their realities of homeless CISS.

CHAPTER 5: INTERACTIONS WITH STATE AND NON-STATE ACTORS

Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the group dynamics among street children and how both instrumental and emotional interests, and an understanding of trust based on these, played a role in the way in-group and intra-group relationships were created, sustained and broken. In Chapters Three and Four, we came across the vulnerable life situations of CISS and the diverse ways they negotiate the multiple challenges they face every day, either individually or primarily as a member of street groups. However, the negotiation of challenges does not in any way diminish the nature of their precarious position within a disrupted childhood. This, as I examine in the current chapter, is despite the efforts of the State and non-State actors (mainly NGOs of different kinds, including international, national, and government-organised ones, working in this domain). This chapter addresses my third and final research question: *How do the State and NGOs make their presence felt within the everyday lives of CISS in Sealdah? How do the ideas, imagination, and programmes for rehabilitation of CISS by these entities align with and deviate from the lived realities of CISS?*

Understandably, a substantial extent of the literature around the role of the State and non-State actors in this area has dealt with policies and programmes appropriate for the rehabilitation and mainstreaming of street children. Socialisation into normative ideas of childhood has formed one of the main assumptions of this body of work. Since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, that is since the 1990s, a universal rights-based framework has framed the normative ideals of children in general. Governments and NGOs have appropriated this framework to work with different vulnerable groups of children. As recent work with vulnerable children, including street children, in the Global South and India has shown, such a rights-based approach projects a moral urgency of 'recovery from victimhood' for these children (Hopkins and Sriprakash 2016; Menon and Saraswathi 2018; Balagopalan 2014, 2018). This has led to particular framing of policies and programmes with specific underlying assumptions about the nature of children's rights, freedom, labour, and responsibilities.

In this chapter, I draw upon my review of State policies and NGO programmes, and

discussions with key members I could access within the State and in large and small NGOs working with street children in Kolkata. The first section of this chapter engages with the legal apparatus and institutional mechanisms relevant to CISS's lives and the predominant approaches for their rehabilitation followed by government and NGO programmes. In the second section, I critically examine two specific areas of intervention – education and vocational skills – in terms of the imagination and implementation models of the NGOs and the ways in which CISS experience and perceive these models. The final section summarises the key arguments and the theoretical issues dealt with in the chapter.

State and NGO Approaches: International and National

Legal Apparatus and Institutional Mechanisms

The first international legal mandate related to child rights was the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), adopted globally in 1989 and ratified by India in 1992. Though previous UN human rights treaties had taken several years for large-scale ratification across the globe and to come into force, UNICEF made this into a priority target along with a network of NGOs across the world, including the influential roles of NGOs such as Save the Children Alliance and Defence for Children International (Bhakhry 2006). However, the UNCRC does not underline the importance of particular vulnerable groups of children but focuses on ensuring the rights of all children, with ratifying nation-states including street children under specific clauses.

However, at the national level, the Constitution of India, which came into force in January 1950, aligned with an understanding of childhood that was to be located within the family as the primary institutional site for socialisation, and included provisions for survival, development and protection of children. As Bhakhry (2006: 19) underlines, this "determined the nature of the relationship between the child, the family and the State and thus created the essential foundations of a national childhood for all children." The two provisions of the Constitution that bear relevance for any work with street children are Article 15(3), which comes under Part III as a Fundamental Right, and asks the State to make special provisions for protecting the rights of children, and Article 39, that comes under Part IV as a Directive Principle of State Policy, and enjoins the State

to ensure that children in their tender age are not abused, are not coerced by economic needs into avocations unsuitable for their age or strength, are provided opportunities to develop healthily with freedom and dignity, and are protected against exploitation and moral and material abandonment.

Among the different legal provisions that are pertinent to any discussions about CISS is the Juvenile Justice Act, 1986, which was brought into effect to deal with the problem of neglected children and children in conflict with the law. Reviews of this Act have been undertaken where the initial Act was repealed and replaced by the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000. Following the ratification in 2003 of the Convention for the Protection of Children and Cooperation for Inter-country Adoption (The Hague Convention), 1993, by the Government of India, this Act was further amended in 2006. With another amendment, the latest version of this Act during my fieldwork was the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015. Yet another more recent landmark legislation is the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSO Act), a comprehensive law that protects children from different kinds of sexual offences, assault, harassment, and pornography. In terms of education, the trajectory of the Right to Education Act, though a long-drawn process, culminated in the enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act) in 2009, that came into force from April 2010. The Government of India also adopted the National Policy for Children 2013 as a reaffirmation of its commitment to a rights-based approach of the UNCRC, compared to a need-based approach, for addressing the existing and emerging problems related to children. Finally, the Ministry of Women and Child Development released the National Plan of Action for Children (NPAC), 2016 that addresses four key priority areas of child rights - (a) survival, health and nutrition; (b) education and development; (c) protection and (d) participation – through a purported sustainable, multi-sectoral, integrated and inclusive approach.

While discussing institutional arrangements to give teeth to these legal provisions, it is worth looking at the main bodies tasked with this mandate – the Commissions for Protection of Child Rights (CPCRs). A legal route, through the Commissions for Protection of Child Rights (CPCR) Act, 2005, was taken for the establishment of the CPCRs; this included providing for the establishment of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), a statutory body established in 2007 under an act of Parliament, and the State Commissions for Protection of Child Rights (SCPCRs) under the state governments. These institutions are meant to serve as the

apex bodies at the national and state levels for promoting and protecting child rights in India, besides monitoring and implementing the legal provisions of the Acts I discussed earlier.

It is pertinent to note how these apex institutions have been envisioned, as that itself provides us with an idea of some of the fundamental issues that I deal with further in this chapter. As Mehendale (2018: 23-24; emphasis mine) in her review of the CPCR observes,

> The process of formulating the law on Commissions for Children in India spanned over eight years and went through two governments - both coalition governments. The statute was meant to give effect to commitments made under the UNCRC, and the efforts to establish the Commission originated at the domestic level. Although the Commission was initially envisaged to be on the lines of the National Human Rights Commission, the provisions in the Bill got diluted over these eight years. The recommendations of the PSC [Parliamentary Standing Committee] were significant and relevant. However, the government did not accept them in totality and, *in fact, left out the recommendations that would have given more teeth to the Commission and ensured its independence. These omissions were significant, and their implications on the way the Commissions are able to fulfill their mandate are evident*. Hence, it is vital that these omissions and dilutions are addressed through a process of law reform. *This review also clearly indicates how the domestic policy processes of negotiation and tokenism take over the determination of which policy ideas should be formulated into a statute*. Despite international factors being a trigger, the recommendations that could have enabled the creation of a body on the lines of the Paris Principles were ignored. *The process also reveals that it was not the absence of ideas or poor conceptualisation that led to the establishment of a weak institution. On the contrary, despite receiving these proposals and recommendations at the official level within the course of law making, the government chose not to take them into consideration. This review showcases the importance given to children's rights in the parliamentary debates and the extent to which the parliamentarians are willing to press the government into making difficult decisions in favour of children*. It is on this background that actions and inactions of the government, both Central and State, towards these monitoring bodies should be understood and questioned.

Mehendale's insightful review makes it clear, that the political will of the State, when it comes to issues related to children's rights and overall well-being, has been weak. The implications of this

lack of political and administrative resolve can, thus, be presumed to be sharper for particularly vulnerable groups of children, thus, can be assumed to be even sharper. This seems to be a continuation of the belief systems of the society at large, including the political system and bureaucracy, of an unwillingness to disturb the existing stratified social order that is reflected even in the prevailing segregated school system (e.g., Weiner 1991; Majumdar and Mooij 2012).

In addition to all these legal provisions and institutional arrangements, the Integrated Programme for Street Children was started in 2009-10 to help children living on the street fulfil their rights. The programme provides for essential needs of street children such as shelter, nutrition, health care and education, and other provisions to protect the children from abuse and exploitation. It has been subsumed under the Integrated Child Protection Scheme of the Ministry of Women and Child Development. The programme is meant to be administered at the state level by state child protection committees and societies.

Programme/Interventions with CISS: Review of Documents and Observations[47]

In this sub-section, I briefly discuss the various intervention categories through which the work of the government and NGOs is carried out to address the concerns of street children. This is not meant to be an exhaustive or detailed list of the various types of interventions, but only a categorisation of the broad approaches that I could find through an analysis of the programme, proposal, and interventions documents through publicly available material on government websites and materials shared by NGOs working on CISS in Kolkata. The primacy given to NGOs and civil society organisations in terms of accomplishing different milestones set in policy documents has been observed in the literature (see Bhakhry 2006: 42). Even a recent report from Save the Children (2019: 85) shows that,

> Most of the [street] children were not aware on how to access the support system and entitlements which exist for them. About 77.8% children have not accessed the support

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[47] These observations were very few as most NGOs did not provide permission to observe their interventions in action in their shelters or residential homes, and even when they did, this was not for any substantial duration.

system which indicates that majority of their population is unaware of its existence. Of those who approached a support system, 9.1% reached out through a NGO.

Early detection of street children:

Both the State and non-State actors have realised that reintegration of street children becomes more and more difficult as these children become used to life on the streets. Delay in identifying CISS and starting intervention processes with them meant that CISS started adopting the street subculture and developed ways and means of survival to the precarious lives on the street as well as a resistance to intervention efforts to mainstream them. Thus, early detection of street children was a favoured approach among NGOs to ensure that children could be detected and started on rehabilitation programmes as soon as they arrived in Sealdah station. This was through identification of catchment points and deployment of field staff and recruits from among the street children (through incentives) to detect 'new arrivals', and subsequent processes of counselling with these children.

Rescue of the street children:

NGO field workers, RPF and GRP, played a significant role in identifying and rescuing street children who were found to be in challenging circumstances. In this case, CHILDLINE 1098, a telephone helpline service run by the NGO Childline India Foundation under the aegis of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, was seen to play an important role, with phone outreach services often being used by citizens to direct NGOs and lawmakers towards children who they found to be in difficult circumstances.[48]

Rehabilitation of CISS:

After being rescued from street situations, these children were kept in temporary shelters for appropriate rehabilitation processes. Counselling support was provided to these children to help them share their life trajectories, experiences of abuse or exploitation, and other information regarding their overall well-being. Particular emphasis was placed on gathering information related to the families of CISS and reasons for their detachment from their families. Those whose

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[48] See Photos 3.9 and 3.10.

families could not be traced were mainly referred to Government Homes or Shelters run by NGOs. After that, these children were further counselled and were inducted in educational, vocational, and/or skills-based activities depending on age and inclination. Focus was also given to life skills so that these children could be equipped to lead a life on their own as adults later. For children whose families could be traced, efforts were made to reunite the children with their respective families.

Ensuring Rights of CISS:

While children lived in institutions, several measures were taken to ensure their basic rights. Initiatives to provide food, shelter, clothes, health care, educational and vocational training were available in the centres. A counselling facility was available to ensure the proper physical, mental, and social well-being of these children. A system of peer-led support programmes, similar to a monitorial system, were visible in the documentation available for many of the activities that were conducted in the residential facilities. Periodic events were organised to showcase the achievements and progress of the children in these centres. A rhetorical emphasis on children's participation in different stages of all such activities was visible in the documentation. Children's opinions and views were said to be considered by the organisations to design, modify, and adopt different initiatives related to education and entertainment for children.

After discussing the legal and institutional apparatus relevant for CISS, and the nature of intervention categories through which programmes for rescue and rehabilitation of CISS were carried out by the government and NGOs, in the next section, I explore how 'education' and 'vocational skills' related work is carried out in the field through these programmes and how CISS experience and respond to this work.

Education and Vocational Skills: *Manush Kora*

Education

In this section, I start with the NGOs' and state policies related to the education of CISS that I came across during my study. I then present a few vignettes from my fieldwork to elaborate on how CISS experienced these ideas and approaches to education.

In the open shelters run by an NGO in Sealdah, there was a distinctive focus on informal education, and field staff of the NGO quite diligently used to observe a routine for the day in the open shelter (see Box 5.1). To further a sense of discipline and engagement of the children with the morning sessions of informal education, the NGO staff used to encourage and sometimes even laid down mandatory rules for entry of children in the shelter to ensure that they came to the sessions from the very beginning rather than the children choosing to come just around lunch time to have their lunch only. In the afternoon, co-curricular activities were carried out and there were external resource persons who came in to train the children in dancing, singing, arts, martial arts, and so on.

Box 5.1: A typical day's schedule in the open shelter for street children[49]

Morning breakfast: 8.30 a.m.; bread- banana / puffed rice-*chola*

Education (informal): 9 a.m. to 12 p.m.

Bath: 12 pm. To 1.30 p.m.

Lunch: around 1.30 p.m.; rice, dal, vegetable (available everyday), in addition, one day egg, one day chicken and one day fish.

Special classes (music/dance/ art/drama): 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

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[49] See Photo 3.8.

Evening snacks: 6 p.m.; 'aloor chop' (potato cutlets)/'beguni' (aubergine fritters) with ' muri' (puffed rice) OR biscuit-banana

Education (informal): 7 p.m. to 8.30 p.m.

Dinner: 8.30 p.m.; rice-vegetable-dal / rice-egg curry / rice-soyabean curry

On special days, such as Children's Day or Republic Day or Independence Day, and so on, the shelters served something different like fried rice with chicken curry or '*khichdi-beguni*'. Food donated by others on some of these special days was distributed among the children. In the shelters counselling sessions took place thrice a week, when a counsellor was present to meet and discuss with the children.

Both NGO staff and many of the street children I met did indicate that they were interested in the informal education sessions of the morning. The NGO facilitators had detailed lesson plans for each session and a portfolio to track each child's progress. Though they were quite diligent in maintaining the regular session-wise lesson plans, in conversations with me they acknowledged how it was difficult for them to maintain a portfolio to track each child, given both the erratic nature of their attendance and the difficulty of providing a teaching-learning focus for each child while facilitating sessions with a group of children from across diverse age-groups and at different learning levels.

The street children shared that they liked the informal format of the learning sessions where they could move from one subject to another, or engage in co-curricular activities as and when they wanted, or even step out to attend other work they had and come back later. However, as soon as the NGO staff started expressing particular interest in some of the so-called 'fast learners' and those progressing relatively better than the others, these children started getting anxious and cautious about their engagement with this learning process. They were fearful that this approach of '*tulte chaoa*' (lift up) or '*manush kora*' (make human), as expressed by the NGO members, would restrict their freedom and bind them to a routine of mainstream schooling, and disciplinary

rules that they were not willing to accept. This was in addition to the peer pressure the children faced from other group members who were not keen on learning and many of the older children who were openly discouraging of the open shelters as being akin to a 'jail' that would take away all the freedom the street children enjoyed. Therefore, any mention of transition to formal education led to dropouts or irregular attendance at the open shelters.

Also, when shifted to hostels or residential facilities to enable mainstream education, it was not as if these children did not have access to substances (drugs, dendrite) they were addicted to. However, what they called '*nesha*' (addiction) also referred to their ability to roam freely in Sealdah and across other places, both near and far, on the trains. In this imagination of being free from institutional disciplinary structures, the street children indicated an 'addiction' beyond that of only substances or drugs. Rather, it was an integral part of their street subculture, in which the freedom to roam about in the station premises, streets, and go to other places as and when they liked on the trains, was considered equally or more addictive than their addiction to drugs. As they often said, "*Sealdah-e ghora, train-e ghora, raasta – amader taane*" (roaming in Sealdah roaming in trains, and the streets – all attract us).[50]

Finally, the children were not oblivious to the nature of 'stigma' associated with street children in the mainstream institutional structures and mechanisms that CISS were enrolled into. This particularly rankled the children and hurt their sense of dignity, with teachers in these institutional contexts continuing to label them as '*rastar chhele*' and sometimes even saying things like '*tora toh rastar chhele, rasta-e thakbi*' (you are street children, you will continue to remain on the streets)[51] when they were not able to keep up with the rest of the class.

While NGO staff members were also sceptical about the meaningfulness of mainstream education for the homeless street children, they were also somewhat bound by it in terms of options available to them through state policies. Even so-called progressive state policies are seen to not go beyond some idea of mainstreaming street children into regular schools. For example, the Child Centric Convergence Model for Street Children – SAMPARC – initiated by the Department of Women & Child Development, Govt of NCT of Delhi, in the context of the coronavirus pandemic

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[50] One of the Fieldnote Dates: 19th November 2015.
[51] Fieldnote Date: 2nd December 2015.

is certainly a laudable effort, especially in terms of coordination across different departments and institutions for a multi-pronged ground-level response (DWCD, Govt. NCT Delhi 2021). However, this model invokes the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009) and emphasises a mainstream model as enacted in this Right:

> The Education Department should accordingly facilitate enrollment of the child to the Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan as part of the overall Samagra Siksha which is meant to support urban deprived children.

> The Education Department shall facilitate linkage of the street children to provisions (if applicable in Delhi) like Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidhyalayas (Residential Schools from class 6th to Class 12th for girls belonging to SC, ST, OBC, Minority and BPL categories), Mid Day Meal, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose residential Schools/Hostels (For educating children without adult protection who are in need of shelter and care), Manodarpan (Psycho-social Support during COVID-19 and beyond).

> (DWCD, Govt. NCT Delhi 2021: 17)

A number of the contradictions examined above, between the efforts of the NGOs and the State for CISS, and the latter's own experiences and assessments of these efforts, are clearly evident in the following few vignettes from my fieldwork.

Vignettes: Views of CISS about Education Efforts of the State and NGOs

Nabab, a 14-year-old boy, shared his thoughts about getting enrolled in schools to receive formal education. When he came to Sealdah 3.5 years back, he used to attend an open shelter facility run by an NGO in the Sealdah Station area. Here, in the mornings, after breakfast, the NGO staff used to teach functional literacy. Nabab already had some basic education as he had studied till grade (class) two in his village. Consequently, Nabab started performing well in the open shelter sessions and took some amount of pride in this. But as the NGO staff realized that Nabab had the capability to learn faster than the others, they started to pressurize him to join classes on a regular basis. When I discussed Nabab's case with the NGO staff, they shared that they had wanted him to pursue education through a Bridge Programme so that they could enrol him in an age-appropriate class in

a mainstream school at the earliest. The NGO was hopeful that Nabab would be one of their 'success' stories. Though Nabab initially started attending classes regularly, he soon lost interest.

In discussions with me, Nabab shared,

> They [the NGO staff] used to pressurise a lot, "You have to study for so much time". And when I could not, they used to scold me. They used to say that I would not be able to get admitted to a regular class the next year like this. I used to get angry. The more I used to say that I would not like to get admitted to a school, I would like to study here only like this, they did not use to listen. I did not dislike studying. But I do not want to follow rules and regulations and study. And I only liked maths and told them I would only study maths. But that was not to be. They wanted to teach me *everything*. I did not like it anymore. So, I stopped going to the classes. I wanted to learn maths but that did not happen. They did not listen to anything I said. They said, "*Sab na porle manush haoa jaabe na*" (If one does not study everything, one will not become human). "*Arre, ami kutta naaki? Manush noi*?" (Nabab's response in our discussion, 'What, am I a dog? Not a human being?'). I like maths and have a use for it. I want to learn. What will I do by learning who has written what poem and when! That is why I have stopped going. I believe in school one has to study many other things besides maths. I am not into that. Besides, there are too many rules, 'sit with your legs folded, sit straight, do not laugh, do not do *masti* (have fun)'. Then what is one supposed to do? Only 'no' and 'no'. Used to eat my head.[52]

Nabab stopped going to the open shelter even as the NGO staff tried to convince him to attend classes regularly. His thoughts, in his discussions with me, showed that be believed that formal education would not help him much as he did not find any relevance of studying different things, except mathematics, in his everyday life.

While Nabab had an interest in studying, Suraj, a 14-year-old boy, had studied up to grade five in his village. But he was not considered a good learner and used to be often punished by his teachers. He had thus developed an apathy towards studying. When he started attending the open shelter in Sealdah and got to know that he had to study there also, he soon lost interest. As Suraj shared with

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[52] Fieldnote Dates: 11th December to 15th December 2015.

me, "*Abar oi paanke pore keu. Kichhu moja nei. Ki bokor kore. Aar gyan dei. Ke shunbe baba*" (Who wants to get into that whirlpool again. There is no fun. They talk so much. And give sagacious advice/knowledge. Who will listen).[53] As a consequence, Suraj used to go to the open shelter only during lunch to have his meals, and avoided it at other times.

Puja Das, a 12-year-old girl, had a different story. She started attending classes with an NGO support programme in Sealdah. She had always wanted to study but did not get an opportunity to go to school in her place of origin as her family did not allow her to do so. As she was a good learner, the NGO staff wanted her to join their residential home facility where she could study more regularly and get more continuous support. However, Puja was extremely reluctant to be confined within a bounded space like her home. She was fearful that it would be difficult for her to get out of there again. She was also not ready to leave the new set of friends that she had made on the streets around Sealdah. As she observed, "*Ami aar kono ghor e dhukte chai na; aar jodi na berote pari? Ekhane bhalo achhi. Jokhon ichhe palate parbo. Tai ami aar class e jai na; jodi ora jor kore niye jae. Ekhane bondhuder sathe thaki*" (I do not want to be in any enclosed place. If I cannot escape anymore? I am fine here. Can always escape from here. So, I no longer attend classes; in case they forcefully take me to a residential home. I am here with friends).[54]

As is evident from the vignettes, there was a strong disconnect between CISS's lived realities and subculture with the educational options offered by both NGOs and the State. Indeed, NGOs after the RTE have little option but to adopt a mainstream schooling approach mandated under the Act for all children aged 6 to 14. On the one hand, such an Act, "In stark contrast to the world of '*khatni*' [labour], (…) contains the promise of a future within the liberal certitudes of equality, opportunity, freedom and social justice" (Balagopalan 2014: 155). That is, rights-based approaches and legal mandates arising from these, such as the RTE, seem to assure access to quality educational opportunities for vulnerable children's groups like CISS, as opposed to the

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[53] Fieldnote Date: 3rd January 2016.
[54] Fieldnote Dates: 20th January to 26th January 2016.

world of labour and daily means of earnings they are generally engaged in. On the other hand, paradoxically, "In the "right to education", what circulates is not "equality" as a form of political power carrying a particular image of justice but rather a set of infrastructural and other technical requirements that are viewed as ensuring "quality" education" (Balagopalan 2014: 167). This imagination of 'rights' and 'schooling', in the realities of the postcolonial state, can do precious little beyond programmatic school enrolment processes for CISS in the form of 'remedial education', 'bridge courses', and 'non-formal education for mainstreaming', with the existing structural context of the lived realities of CISS being left unaddressed.

Thus, the continuing failure of these approaches to bring about meaningful changes in the lives of CISS (and other such vulnerable groups of children) is treated more as a failure of either the 'education system' in terms of its institutional and implementational dimensions (see Sharma and Ramachandran 2009), or as an inherent feature of these vulnerable groups that makes it impossible to 'remedy' them to the normative mainstream (see Hopkins and Sriprakash 2016). This was most starkly evident in CISS's narratives about teachers' perceptions of them being uneducable as they were from the streets. A similar discursive narrative about the deficit inherent in particular forms of 'childhood', has also been noted in the case of the government school system, with teachers having similar perceptions about the predominantly socially disadvantaged groups that now access this system (see Vasavi 2015; Majumdar and Mooij 2012).

Vocational skills

In the case of vocational education for relatively older children, the NGOs did have more freedom of choice in terms of vocational opportunities for which they could counsel, guide, and train the street children. Basic vocational skills such as repairs of refrigerators, mobile phones, cycles and bikes, and televisions were predominant, along with training for carpentry, tailoring, security guard services, beautician services, caregiving services, and the making of '*bori*' (dried dal dumpling), papad, and jam. However, most children said they were interested in mobile repairing, car-repair services, and machine-based tailoring, options that were not often provided by the NGOs (except for mobile repairing). For car-repair services, NGOs indicated that CISS needed a basic level of literacy and education to understand the technicalities of the various things they would be taught,

and which, according to them, most children did not have and in which the children were unwilling to invest their time. Similarly, for machine-based tailoring, the NGOs emphasised that the children would need basic skills in hand-based stitching work before moving to machine-based work, which for them was hard to convince the children about.

The concern of the NGO staff members was more to quickly find an available option to 'place' the children, and show fulfilment of their targets with funding agencies, rather than explore the specific needs expressed by or understand the skill sets available with the street children, and then align their counselling and placement processes with the latter. My interactions with the NGOs and analysis of their programmes showed that, in reality, NGOs worked with limited available options for vocational training, more often guided by funding considerations, that is, skills-based programmes for which these NGOs could get funding. Also, neither was there much follow-up done by the NGOs to monitor how the children had adapted to the vocations they had been assigned to nor about how they were progressing in terms of their learning in these vocations. Another big drawback of these vocational placement programmes was that most of these programmes offered a stipend only at the end of the programme; this directly contradicted the lived experiences of the children who were used to earning regularly and generally had ready cash to spend on their various needs. The short planning horizon that homeless street children were accustomed to in terms of life on the streets, did not align with the long-term planning horizon the vocational programmes sought to enrol these children into.

Here again, as in the case of educational interventions, the following vignettes from my fieldwork bring out the tension and discrepancies that exist between the vocational skill-building efforts of the NGOs and the State, and the CISS's lived experiences and responses to these efforts.

Vignettes: Views of CISS about Vocational Education, Livelihoods and Labour

Badshah, a 14-year-old boy, had the following to share about his experience of attending a vocational training centre.[55] Badshah had functional literacy but did not want to study further as he felt it would not be of any use to him. Badshah was very popular among the street children and

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[55] Fieldnote Dates: 16th February to 22nd February 2016.

was considered a '*guru*' by many street children across groups; he was also the leader of one of the street groups. Like most leaders, Badshah used to liaison and maintain good relations with other stakeholders who mattered in terms of the daily lives of street children, such as local shopkeeper associations, RPF, GRP, and NGOs.

Through one of the NGOs working on street children in Kolkata, Badshah got an offer to get trained in repairing refrigerators. It was a residential training for six months. There would be no stipend offered to the trainees during the training, though all arrangements such as accommodation, food and other related expenses would be free. The NGO also assured Badshah a job on completion of the training. Badshah, however, was not interested in refrigerator repairing and was interested in mobile repairing as he was obsessed with collecting (mostly stealing) different mobiles and learning many things to do through the applications available. This fascination for mobile phones was common across street children, though for various reasons, from watching and making TikTok videos, creating imaginary profiles on different social media pages to make and chat with virtual friends, and watching pornography. Badshah was, therefore, of the opinion that his skills in mobile repairing would increase his standing among the street children and could also be a good source of earnings, as he saw from the petty shops around Sealdah.

Besides the non-attractiveness of a proposition of training for repairs of refrigerators, Badshah was uncomfortable with the idea of a residential training programme that would entail that he be away from his group and subordinates over a significant period of time; he was afraid the group dynamics could change entirely in this period. Consequently, Badshah chose not to join the training. As he shared with me,

> "*Ami jeta chaichi seta hobe na. Oder kotha moto ki sob hobe? Ami fridge shariye korbo ta ki? Rasta theke ami jabo na. Ekhaane amar ekta royab ache. Mobile sharano shikhle ami ekhhane thekei kaj chalate partam. Amar kothata bujhtey chailo na. Bole okhane seat khali achhe. Amake boka peyechhe? Amar kono bhalo chae na. Oder seat bhorti korte amake dakchhe. Bole pore abar mobile repairing-e bhorti korbe. Ami aar patta-i di ni. Amar doler chheleder-o tante cheyechhilo. Shobaike bole diyechhi oder phande pa na dite. Joto sob 'taar kata' public – amar dorkar ek, aar korte bole aarek.*"

[What I want, that will not happen. Does all have to happen in terms of what they [the NGOs] want? What will I do repairing fridges? I will not leave the street. I have a certain

recognition and influence here. If I learn mobile repairs, I can stay here and continue to work. They did not understand what I was trying to say. They said that only those seats [for fridge repairs] are available. Have they taken me to be a fool? They do not want anything good for me. They are calling me to fill up their seats. They were saying that they will later enrol me for mobile repairing also. I did not listen to them. They wanted to enrol other children from my group also. I have told everyone not to fall into their trap. All 'useless' people – my need is one, and they ask me to do something else.]

Kareena was a 13-year-old homeless girl on the streets of Sealdah.[56] Kareena was told by an NGO worker that she would be enrolled in a program to learn hand-stitching. This was despite Kareena stressing that she wanted to learn sewing using a sewing machine and did not like embroidery work that required her to stay still and sit patiently for a long time. However, Kareena agreed to go as it was a non-residential programme of one year (3 days a week, 5 hours a day), and she could stay connected with her friends. She was ready to sacrifice her earnings on the streets for those three days.

However, during the training, the skills that were mostly taught which were those that did not need machines, such as '*run, bokeya shelai, zari boshano*' (different forms of stitching). Kareena primarily had to do stitching on white clothes and add '*zari*' and '*chumki*' on colourful clothes. Kareena shared that she got bored with this work. She asked the teacher when she would be introduced to a sewing machine. The teacher insulted her, bringing up her background on the streets, "*Rasta te thake. shokh koto. Eder boste dile shute chay*" (They stay on the streets. And have all kinds of grand wishes. When given a place to sit, they want to lie down). All other participants in the programme started laughing, and Kareena felt humiliated. Kareena never went back to the training centre. She felt she was cheated. As Kareena shared with me, "*Amra rasta-te thakte paari, kintu oder khai na, pori na. Amake gorom dekhiye labh nei. Lath mere chole esechhi kapor-e*" (We may live on the streets, but we do not eat food given by them or wear clothes given by them. So, there is nothing to be gained by insulting me. I kicked their clothes and came away).

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[56] Fieldnote date: 2nd March 2016.

The concerns, as expressed in the vignettes above, resonated in the questions that many street children had about residential vocational training facilities which were offered by most NGOs. The NGO staff in the shelters would make a note of the interests of the street children over a period of time in their preliminary interactions with the children. Besides other forms of counselling, vocational counselling was done by trained resource persons with requisite qualifications who were deputed periodically to these shelters, and these were mostly one-on-one counselling. The questions that were foremost on the children's minds during counselling for such vocational programmes were, '*amake kothae niye jaabe*', '*amake okhane kotodin thakte hobe*', '*amake okhane marbe ki*', '*ami kaaj na parle ki hobe*' (where will I be taken; how long do I have to stay there, will I be beaten up there, what will happen if I am not able to do the work).[57] As counsellors also shared in their discussions with me, there was perpetual anxiety among the children whether they would be able to return to their groups and friends in Sealdah and whether they would be confined to a regimented life. A sense of being isolated from the rest of the street children seemed to be sharply evident in these queries and anxieties. While street children showed they were aware that NGO staff would not abuse or beat them, and even sometimes exploited this knowledge to threaten the field-level staff (with threats of false accusations of being abused if the field-staff persisted with some directive or advice that the children did not like), they were more unsure about the residential centres for vocational trainings that were beyond the realm of their '*thek*' (space of comfort). Older children often fed into these fears of the younger and newer children, by spreading stories about abuse by both staff and other children not from the streets who were enrolled in these vocational programmes; this was to retain these children within their groups.

The children were also unsure about the 'nature of the future' being assured through these opportunities. As many children used to say, "*kaaj shekhar samay sukha thakte hobe; amar loss hobe*" (I have to remain dry [without earnings] while learning the trade; I will make a loss).[58] The estimated earnings they made through various activities ranged from around INR 100 per day for younger children to INR 500 per day for relatively older children who were active on the streets (as shared by CISS during my fieldwork). Given that the NGO field-level staff were paid in the range of INR 3000 – INR 4000 per month, the children would often tauntingly share with me, "*ora*

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[57] One of the Fieldnote Dates: 20th January 2017.
[58] Fieldnote Date: 20th April 2017.

toh amra ja kamai tao kamate paare na" (They [the NGO field staff] cannot even earn what we earn).[59]

There seemed to be an interesting dichotomy in the understanding of *patience* that NGO staff harped upon in their counselling sessions with children and what children themselves thought of *being patient*, specifically related to future opportunities that NGOs offered to them. The counsellors used expressions like, '*dhoirjo dhorle manush hobe*'; and '*dhoirjo dhorley osadhho sadhon kora jae*' (You will become a human being if you are patient; If you are patient, you can achieve even the impossible). On the other hand, CISS used the same expression '*dhoirjo*' (patience), asking sarcastically in conversations with me, "We have *dhoirjo*, that is how we have survived on the streets"; and "They [the NGO staff] ask us to become human beings, stand on our own feet, are we not human beings? Don't we earn on our own and live life on our own terms? What do they expect?" The sense in which *dhoirjo* was used by CISS connotated resilience in the face of multiple adversities they faced on the streets as opposed to the sense of 'need for patience' to 'become capable human beings' as emphasised by the NGOs.

Similarly, the idea of labour or work – '*kaaj*' – differed in terms of the understanding of CISS and NGOs in a significant manner. For CISS, *kaaj* was whatever they were doing on their own and making an earning on the streets, without anyone forcing them to do so. The children expressed a preference for this freedom of choice that they perceived they had in terms of opportunities on the streets. They were opposed to any form of labour where, '*onyoder kotha mene cholte hobe*' (have to do as told by others), and the '*gyaan*' (meant in a derogatory way to indicate condescension, especially when sharing knowledge) they thought that NGO workers had to share with them about other more mainstream opportunities. On the other hand, NGOs were of the view that what CISS actually did as work on the streets was exploitative child labour and that they were offering better opportunities for meaningful *kaaj* to these children through the vocational options. The field-staff often shared how CISS did not think about their future at all and that the way they lived their lives could not go on forever in the same way.

It is well known that the postcolonial Indian State has thought of education and life opportunities for poor and marginalised children in significantly different ways, as compared to

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[59] One of the Fieldnote Dates: 12th May 2017.

the rest of the population who already had acquired a certain amount of cultural capital through their social positions and social mobility during the colonial period and other periods of sequestered economic growth benefitting specific population groups post-Independence (Upadhya 1997; Kumar 2006; Mehendale and Mukhopadhyay 2019). These ideas have also been legitimised through educational policies and institutional arrangements, mainly in the form of non-formal education for the poor, and of more recent the withdrawal of the State in favour of non-State actors in the realm of education with implications for class inequalities, institutional quality, and learning outcomes for government schools that are only accessed by the poorest of the poor (Jain et al. 2018; Nawani and Sanyal 2021). As Rajan (2021: 3; emphasis mine), points out, even

> The 2020 National Education Policy (NEP) uses the term 'Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups' (SEDGs) to include a variety of categories such as girls, other gender minorities, children with special needs, SC, ST, OBCs, Muslims, urban poor and migrant communities, and *proposes 'multiple pathways' including both formal and non-formal educational modes to ensure the educational inclusion of SEDGs*. This can only be read as a continuation of the 1986 National Policy on Education (NPE), which legitimised and formalised Non-Formal Education (NFE) and the two-tier system of schooling for children outside the structure of formal schooling (Kumar 2006).

The vocational education opportunities, seemingly offered to CISS as a spectrum of choices for mainstream livelihood options, can be understood as an extension of the above ideas and institutional arrangements. My fieldwork experiences showed that not much had changed since the 1990s, when "the dominant discourse in street children policy worlds was that they required rudimentary literacy and some vocational training to be absorbed into the informal economy as partially skilled labour" (Balagopalan 2014: 89). Though the broader discourse has shifted towards an idea of 'Life Skills Education' (LSE) on implementation measures related to CISS, and that "States should support positive measures, such as: empowering children in street situations through child rights education and the development of life skills" (CSC 2020: 14), this discourse has also been shown to be problematic, especially in the context of non-developed countries. As Maithreyi (2019: 71) underscores, "this literature [around LSE] fails to examine what skills are valued as 'life skills', and how they allude to elite, middle-class values and cultures that serve to mark

children from disadvantaged backgrounds as 'failures' for not internalising structural disadvantages and succeeding against all odds".

Discussion

This chapter was focused on addressing the question of how interventions of the State and NGOs related to CISS are thought of and implemented and the extent to which these initiatives align with the subculture, imaginations, anxieties and lived experiences of CISS.

A review of international and national legal mandates showed that a rights perspective has been dominant in the approaches adopted by governments and non-government actors towards CISS since the UNCRC. However, in the context of countries like India, these mandates were also observed to exist without the presence of the following: political will to invest in required institutional resources, independence of functioning of regulatory bodies, and capacity building for the statutory institutions across all levels created for childcare and protection. Moreover, though a symbolic or discursive transition has happened from a 'needs-based' approach to a 'rights-based' approach in the official documents and rhetoric of State and non-State actors working with CISS, the fundamental approaches adopted indicate the dominance of a 'paternalist' or 'welfare' model as opposed to an 'emancipation' or 'liberation' model that is more aligned to a rights-based approach. Here I refer to the prevalent ideas around the rehabilitation of street children and the often-used programme models through a set of four positions suggested by Hanson (2012) in terms of schools of thought in human rights. These are: Paternalism, Welfare, Emancipation and Liberation. Paternalist models see street children as a category of people deserving special protection. The main idea behind the programs is that children have almost no agency in absolute terms, regardless of their context and culture. On the other extreme, Liberationists consider children as equivalent to adults and stress the right of children to self-determination and make rational decisions about their lives. In the middle of these two extremes lie the Welfare and Emancipation approaches. The Welfare approach balances views from the Paternalist and Liberationist model but gives preference to protection rights compared to participation rights. Emancipation is a perspective that uses similar nuances as the Welfare approach, but here the focus is tilted more towards autonomy, participation rights and equal rights.

Experiences of interventions in both education and vocation skills reinforced the paradigm of 'paternalism' (and to some extent 'welfare'), where the idea of rescuing the children from an anomalous existence, which is perceived to be neither childhood nor adulthood, to an idea of normative childhood, was foregrounded. Thus, '*manush kora*', '*opore tola*', '*dhoirjo raakha*' (making human, lifting up, ensuring patience) formed the imagination and vocabulary with which interventions in both education and vocational skills were carried out by the NGOs rather than any reflection on the structural conditions that determined the life trajectories of these children or how CISS imagined and engaged with their own lived realities. Disconnect in terms of imagination of CISS and NGO work was also observed in their understanding of how the 'future' was thought about, the need for 'patience' in terms of achieving something worthwhile, and the nature of what was considered 'work/labour'. Such a paradigm of development intervention with CISS, according to Amartya Sen (2009), would lead, at most, to the fulfilment of an idea of justice as '*niti*', with any form of substantive justice in the form of '*nyaya*' remaining a pipedream. Here I refer to Sen's critique of Rawls' theory of justice, drawing on the idea of a '*niti-nyaya*' distinction (Sen 2009). While Rawls posits that justice draws upon just rules and institutions, constructed under particular justice-generating conditions, Sen claims this is mere '*niti*', a rule-based understanding of justice which falls in the realm of ideal theory. For Sen, realisable justice depends on the coming together of factors beyond institutions and rules, and includes culture, dispositions and behaviours of people, and how these interrelate with rules and institutions (Maffettone, 2011).

In addition, stigmatisation (as we saw in Chapter Three), by both close stakeholders such as NGO field staff and more peripheral but significant stakeholders like schoolteachers and resource persons in vocational training centres, continued to be a part of the journey of mainstreaming that child went through (or were expected to go through) in the formal institutional settings.

In the final section, Part Three of the dissertation, I conclude by outlining the main arguments of my study and underlining the study's theoretical, methodological, and policy implications.

PART THREE

CONCLUSION

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Variously known as 'invisible', 'forgotten', and 'nowhere' children, street children have been identified as a particularly vulnerable population group since the 1990s. Among these children, the 'homeless' children that this thesis engages with form an even more excluded and marginalised group despite several years of work by government agencies and civil society organisations, both international and national. These children continue to be unaccounted for in population surveys conducted by the government, and reliable estimates of the numbers of these children continue to be unavailable among those agencies engaged in the welfare of such children.

Though the context of the pandemic did not form a part of this study, it would be callous and unethical to ignore the effects of the pandemic on this population group. The Consortium for Street Children (CSC 2020), has been proactively gathering information about this worldwide, and had the following observations: 'Some of CSC's network members have reported increases in violence against children in street situations during the pandemic.' The following are its observations with specific reference to India (ibid.: 1):

> In India, CSC network member Safe Society reported that children in street situations and their families are "facing high discrimination and torture" due to public perceptions of the pre-existing respiratory diseases to which their living situations make them particularly susceptible. According to Childline Foundation India, Safe Society reports that the volume of calls to the national childline soared by 50% between the 25th and 31st of March, of which 30% were related to abuse and violence.

Despite commitments that have been made in international covenants (e.g., the UNCRC), and in spite of the protection of rights of children that find mention in the Constitution of India (Article 15(3); Article 39), and the large number of legal mandates that endorse the protection and rights of vulnerable children at various 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), homeless street children continue to persist as a challenge in urban India, as in many developing countries across the globe. Along with these legal mandates and welfare schemes run by the national and state governments, there has been a significant amount of effort that civil society

organisations (both international and national) have invested in, primarily since the ratification of the UNCRC, to ensure a better future for CISS.

In conjunction with these efforts, a substantial body of academic work has also developed around CISS, both in the Global North and in the Global South. As I noted in Chapter One and Chapter Two, this academic work has two broad strands – one emerging in the realm of policy studies, and mainly quantitative, the other emerging from both the domain of Childhood Studies and a number of theoretical positions in the social sciences, and primarily qualitative, with a limited amount of quantitative focus in terms of methodology. However, academic work with CISS aligned with this second strand has been quite limited in the Indian context. There is almost no work available in India focusing specifically on homeless street children in railway stations through a theoretical lens that has attempted to provide a conceptual understanding of the everyday realities of CISS or their agency in the face of structural violence, moving beyond the mere descriptive. My study is located within this second strand and, in a way, at a point of convergence of both childhood studies and other social science studies that have, of recent, emphasised a social constructivist paradigm to make meaning of the everyday lives of children and differently situated childhoods. While a social constructivist approach allowed me to explore issues of both structure (that is, the macro-social and institutional context) and agency (that is, means of resistance and subversion) in the everyday lives of CISS, I also departed from the oft-taken path of devaluation of different welfare interventions in this literature, which bypasses 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.

The key research questions that I set out to address through this study are the following:

1. How are the individual and collective identities of homeless street children in Sealdah constructed? How do the children negotiate their ever-present label as 'less than normal children'? What defines the subculture of these so-called deviant and marginal urban groups?

2. What dynamics can be observed within and between sub-groups of CISS, and what role do these processes play in fulfilling basic material and emotional needs among CISS?

3. How do the State and NGOs make their presence felt within the everyday lives of CISS in Sealdah? How do the ideas, imagination, and programmes for rehabilitation of CISS by these entities align with and deviate from the lived realities of CISS?

In this concluding chapter, I summarise my arguments concerning my key research questions. Following this, I present an outline of the key theoretical issues that I have presented in my study and the methodological contributions that this study makes. I also elaborate on contributions to policy around CISS that emerge from this work. I conclude the chapter by indicating possible research agendas that can be followed up on from this study.

Summary of Arguments

This study was a long-duration (2014 to 2018) qualitative study based on fieldwork mainly with homeless street children (CISS) in and around Sealdah Railway Station, in Kolkata, West Bengal. The study engaged with a large number of itinerant CISS and followed up intensively with a specific cohort of 11 street children, a cohort that remained fairly steady throughout the study in terms of repeated discussions and observations.

A review of my initial fieldwork with CISS started to throw up themes that are found in the wider literature around street children, including questions related to their identity, stigmatisation, and subculture. In Chapter Three, I examined these questions by analysing the empirical evidence from my fieldwork with CISS. This showed that CISS, in their everyday lives, discarded ascriptive identity categories of caste, ethnicity and religion that are visibly present and get foregrounded in most work around children in the Indian context. What was evident was a deliberate attempt to create both a new identity on the streets that cannot be traced back in any way to their original identities and addresses and an identity that was also malleable in terms of its nominal descriptor. This malleability depended on the individual charisma of the child vis-à-vis other children and the position within street groups the child was able to create for himself. At the same time, their 'othering' by the larger society was present in their self-categorization and identification as '*rastar chhele/meye*' (boys/girls of the street). This category was also invoked to convey a sense of identity that was, in resilience and self-reliance, different to that of normative

middle-class childhoods. There was gender-based differences, with female children assuming a subservient role to their male counterparts and even assuming names their male partners wanted them to take on.

Stigmatisation, as 'children of the street', by different stakeholders CISS came across every day, was also discussed in Chapter Three. Different coping mechanisms were observed among CISS to deal with how they were labelled as thieves, dirty, untrustworthy, and how girls were often looked upon as sex workers. While male children reinforced these labels by showing indifference and even a sense of pride in the aggressive/rogue -masculinity some of the labels connoted for those who thus labelled them, girls made efforts to reflect more accepted social norms of being seen as 'good girls'. This was evident in the ways they tried to attach themselves to particular male partners and their emotional and physical behavioural displays with these partners. However, specific strategic posturing was also seen among the children, as strategies that they thought would help them to secure a relatively stronger sense of safety than they would be exposed to without such representations of the self. CISS was seen to be self-aware of their non-normative ways of being, and both substance abuse and an underlying (subconscious) dread of what the future held for them appeared to indicate how they, despite being aware of the self-destructive nature of some of their activities, tried to cope with this awareness.

The subculture of CISS was strongly linked to the idea of the street and the sense of freedom and, paradoxically, security it offered, compared to institutional spaces such as shelters and residential homes. A sense of security was also sought through peer relationships that, though fragile in reality, were invested with rhetorical and emotion-laden performative gestures. For girls, this sense of security was seen more strongly in relationships formed with surrogate families. In addition, '*kaaj*' (work/labour) and their pride in this work, which mainly derived from various forms of activities around the street, formed an integral part of the subculture of CISS. These activities included unloading heavy provisions from trucks in the nearby wholesale market, washing and cleaning in small hotels, selling stolen or second-grade gadgets and commodities at discounted rates, collecting leftovers from train compartments, and drug peddling. The pride in these activities that CISS had derived from a sense of resilience and capability of being on their own that these activities entailed and supported vis-à-vis normative childhoods. Interestingly, these

activities were not seen to have any differentiated sense of normative connotations based on the types of activity – so-called deviant or non-deviant – they engaged in.

Chapter Four unpacked the processes of socialisation and intra- and inter-group dynamics that also constituted a key aspect of the subculture of CISS. Induction processes were observed to be gendered and age-based, and strongly depended on the potential value of the new member as a contributor to group activities. Mentorship into instrumental competencies required for survival on the streets was a part of this socialisation process for male children. In contrast, perceived sexual attractiveness was a strong criterion in influencing induction into a group for the female children. There were no all-female-members groups that I came across or heard of during the fieldwork period. Access to information was deemed as one of the most important resources in determining leadership, and information was used strategically by leaders, as well as other group members to influence both intra- and inter-group dynamics in positive and negative ways (that is, to maintain group solidarities or create ruptures within the group). The nature of deployment of instrumental competencies and emotional competencies by the leaders, and other members, created a sense of trust – '*biswas*' – that was both fragile and strong, and depended on how these competencies played out in specific activities carried out by the group and what group members were interested in. However, despite occasional inter-group brawls over vested interests that could be either material/instrumental or emotional (mainly, sexual relationships), the different groups were observed to have a larger identity of '*rastar chhele*' under which they united for any common cause, primarily in terms of conflicts with other stakeholders.

The final chapter – Chapter 5 – of Section Two of my thesis delved into the models of intervention and programmes adopted by the government and NGOs for CISS. After examining the legal mandates behind CISS in the international and Indian context, the chapter presented a critical review of the inadequacy of the institutional apparatuses that are present in the Indian context for implementing the human-rights perspective to CISS, which has been the dominant perspective propagated across the globe since the UNCRC. Thereafter, examples of both educational interventions and vocational skills interventions were outlined from the fieldwork to reflect on how the imagination, practises, and experiences related to these interventions differed between implementing agencies (mainly NGOs) and CISS. These differences underscored how models of interventions related to CISS, even though imbued rhetorically with a rights-based

perspective by NGOs and in policy and programme documents, fail to accommodate the existing competencies, insecurities, life experiences of CISS. Overall, paternalistic, and welfare-based approaches that continue to align with a perceived needs-based perspective for addressing issues of vulnerable children, as opposed to emancipatory or liberatory approaches that align more with a rights-based perspective, are seen to dominate the programmes adopted by NGOs and the practises of their staff at the implementation level.

Contributions

Theoretical

The study contributes to the existing body of work in Childhood Studies and other social science disciplines, mainly Sociology and Anthropology, that have studied CISS in the Indian context. Though there is an existing body of work in this strand (see Mathur 2009; Dabir and Athale 2011; Balagopalan 2014), this is relatively less as compared to the literature that exists globally in similar contexts (e.g., Latin America), and even when compared to the more empirically descriptive studies generated on the status of CISS and related programmatic interventions. The latter have been carried out mostly by big NGOs such as Save the Children and are in the form of more extensive survey studies covering multiple cities (see Save the Children 2011; 2016; 2019). Also, the theoretical import of the former body of work in the Indian context is limited, except for Balagopalan (2014), with many of the other studies exploring only the different factors behind CISS, the challenges they face, and the nature of interventions that are carried out by the government and NGOs, mostly from a descriptive methodological paradigm. The current study addresses this gap by engaging with some key conceptual issues related to CISS using a social constructivist theoretical paradigm but drawing upon different disciplines from the social sciences to engage with these issues. The social constructivist paradigm, as has been pointed out by Balagopalan (2011), Hopkins and Sriprakash (2016), and Menon and Saraswathi (2018), helps to provide a contextual and culturally situated critical understanding of vulnerable children, in comparison to the more pervasive 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.

In studying the issues of identity, stigma, and subculture among CISS, the theoretical boundaries of the existing work on these issues are extended at several levels. First, the issue of everyday lived realities of girl-children among CISS has been seldom dealt with separately, even among critical ethnographic studies (e.g., Balagopalan 2014), in the Indian context. Though in limited ways, the dissertation engages with the gender question squarely through these issues and emphasises the gender-based differences that prevail in how identity, stigma and subculture operate among CISS. Second, while the issue of CISS as 'deviant' and 'outsiders' has been engaged with quite extensively in the available research on CISS, how CISS negotiate such an 'outsider' identity through diverse representations of the self draws attention to the work of Erving Goffman. At one level, the CISS seemed to perform and present different impressions of the self, depending on the situation (Goffman 1978), and at another level, their stigmatisation by the larger society prompted them to use complex images of themselves to understand themselves and also to represent themselves to others (Goffman 1963). The reinforcement of labels such as 'children of the street' in the everyday experiences of street children across diverse stakeholders and institutions, despite their presentations of different ideas of the self, was visible in their own often expressed reaffirmation of this identity. This was seen to resonate with Bourdieu's idea of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Third, subculture among the CISS indicated how it was not only about the assertion of a set of cultural norms different from normative childhoods (e.g., Willis 1977), but also mediated by 'strategic opportunising' where both the agency of the children and the structural limits of this agency was visible in the various instrumental and emotional dimensions of the relationships that made up their everyday lives.

The concept of socialisation and trust came to the foreground when examining intra- and inter-group dynamics among CISS. While socialisation of new children into sub-groups displayed different stages of assimilation, similar to existing studies, this study pointed towards the ways in which such processes and stages of assimilation were dependent on gender, age, and instrumental competencies possessed or acquired by the newcomers. The idea of trust, in the expression of '*biswas*', both in terms of actual relationships and as a rhetorical device to reinforce what were ultimately fragile relationships, was observed to be a key element of group dynamics among street children. Sociological theories, drawing upon works of varied scholars, have approached the idea of trust in different ways. A number of these theories have emphasized the role of the affective in an understanding of trust. Others have pointed out the importance of instrumental dimensions of

trust that might vary from activity to activity and would depend on the nature of incentives between the parties involved. In this study, drawing upon Georg Simmel's work on 'trust', I underlined the need to understand trust as a process dependent on the past, present, and ideas of the future that street children held and how these played into relationships among street children and with other stakeholders.

Finally, the disconnect between rights-based policy rhetoric and the realities of institutional structures and programme implementation showed the continuing presence of paternalistic and welfarist approaches to interventions with CISS, as elaborated in Hanson's framework (Hanson 2012). The distinction that Amartya Sen (2009) makes between '*niti*' and '*nyaya*' was also visible in the ways in which, despite the presence of institutional forms of redressal being available for CISS, there remained an absence of substantive justice for them due to lack of overall political will and weak institutional structures.

Methodological

As discussed in detail in Chapter Two, I adopted a long-duration qualitative research approach, which though similar to ethnography, cannot be classified as a classical ethnography due to the nature of the interactions with my respondent group. The mobile nature of the larger cohort of street children, their irregular schedules in everyday activities, and the intermittent nature of the meetings I could have with them did not allow for participant observations, a key element of an ethnographic approach. However, what I did achieve was a more intensive interaction with a smaller cohort of children who I could meet periodically throughout my fieldwork more consistently. The adoption of the approach of a 'street researcher' allowed me to not only limit my fieldwork to Sealdah Station and its surrounding areas but also prompted me to access other sites farther away frequented by these children, in terms of other intermittent activities CISS were engaged in, and even to trace their life journeys after the cleaning drive at Sealdah station.

For data collection, I used a diverse set of tools, mainly non-participant observations and participatory play activities with CISS, interviews in different forms (from informal discussions with street children to semi-structured interviews with lower-level functionaries in NGOs and government departments, and structured interviews with senior functionaries in these institutions), and documents (both publicly available, mainly of the 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. These multiple sources of data were not only useful for triangulation and strengthening the credibility of the emerging patterns that I could obtain from an analysis of the data but also for probing into contradictions that were particularly apparent between the imagination, belief systems, and practises of CISS and the NGO programmes related to CISS. The study could have probably been further strengthened if I had access to resources to conduct a quantitative survey of the larger cohort of children, in terms of inquiring into different factors leading them to life on the streets and what they considered as challenges and opportunities in terms of their everyday life on the streets.

Finally, the ethical dilemmas related to this study were complex and deeply subjective in terms of its experience. I tried to maintain a sense of broad ethical commitment to what the respondents wanted to share and what they shared, without the possibility of ensuring regular ethical codes of informed consent that studies with children generally require with my respondent group. This was by trying to be a part of their everyday joys and sorrows beyond the regular schedule of my fieldwork timings and days, including participating in a sort of picnic the children had. While I could, in terms of my thesis writing process, maintain discretion in terms of anonymity and confidentiality of data regarding the non-normative (illegal) activities and practises the children were part of, the more burning dilemma was the inability to make any meaningful contributions to see a change in their vulnerable circumstances during this study. I hope to address this limitation through my work with RIHAD in the coming days.

Policy

Though this study did not place itself within the scope of policy studies in terms of its methodological thrust, important insights emerge related to the current nature of policies and programmes related to CISS in the Indian context from the study.

First, as noted in Chapter Five, interventions by both the government and NGOs continue to fall within the needs-based models of Paternalism and Welfare and not Emancipation or Liberation, as should be in a stronger rights-based perspective to the issues concerning CISS (Hanson 2012). While the overall shift in the discourse about children's rights is a move in the right direction, responses of CISS across the study show that this might need to be read along with

an understanding of existing capabilities and agency of CISS. This would entail the need to integrate more participatory approaches in the interventions with CISS at every stage, from needs assessment and programme design to implementation by State and non-State actors.

Second, and as a continuation of point one, the imagination, capabilities (social, physical, emotional, instrumental), and deep-seated distrust, anxieties, and trauma that CISS live with every day, did not seem to find a resonance in the approaches or belief systems within which the groundwork of the interventions with CISS are based. This study shows that there is a need to understand the nature of the everyday lives of street children, including their life trajectories from source to destination, for developing any multi-pronged approach that can address the diverse issues these children face – poverty, education, health, exploitation, abuse, stigmatisation, and overall social neglect. This resonates with many of the observations made in the General Comment No. 21 (2017) on Children in Street Situations (UNCRC 2017).

Third, there is a need to re-imagine institutional approaches to education, vocational education, and life-skills education. These are not segregated into separate pathways of differential quality that segregate between different sections of the population in terms of quality and choices available. This segregation already exists in the Indian education system. It is seen to be reinforced in both policy documents, programme approaches and quality of institutions and programmes available for the haves and have-nots (see Majumdar and Mooij 2012; Ramachandran 2018). Rather, what is needed is a choice of 'educational' pathways that is equitable across all sections of the society from an early age and approaches that can integrate these pathways with the lived experiences and existing competencies of marginal groups of children and yet offer all equal choices of livelihood opportunities for the future.

Finally, and most importantly, the study underlines, as a number of other such studies related to the world of children in the Indian context (Weiner 1991; Nieuwenhuys 2005; Dreze and Sen 2002), the lack of any political will and vision concerning the world of multiple childhoods that exist in the country, with specific reference to marginalised groups. This, in turn, is reflected in the institutional arrangements (e.g., CPCRs) for childcare and protection that, though created as independent statutory bodies with well-defined roles and responsibilities, are not invested with

either resources or authority or power to fulfil the roles envisioned for and needed by these institutions.

Future Research Agendas

This study has shown how long-duration in-depth qualitative fieldwork, using several data collection methods, can provide deeper insights into specific children groups that are still considered at the margins of our society. Though this particular study focused only on CISS (and that too a specifically vulnerable subgroup within what is generally defined as CISS), possibilities of similar work with CISS in general and with other such marginal population groups of children, including migrant children, children in conflict zones, and children in vulnerable situations during the ongoing COVID pandemic. Even with the current focus of the study, there is a need for further studies that can incorporate survey tools to map out what is now a scattered group of homeless street children spread across urban spaces in Kolkata and other such cities. There is also the need for studies that can look at the sources of these population groups and can carry out empirical work at both source and destination end to understand better the diverse set of policy interventions that would be required to address the multiple challenges and concerns associated with children such as those who formed a part of this study.
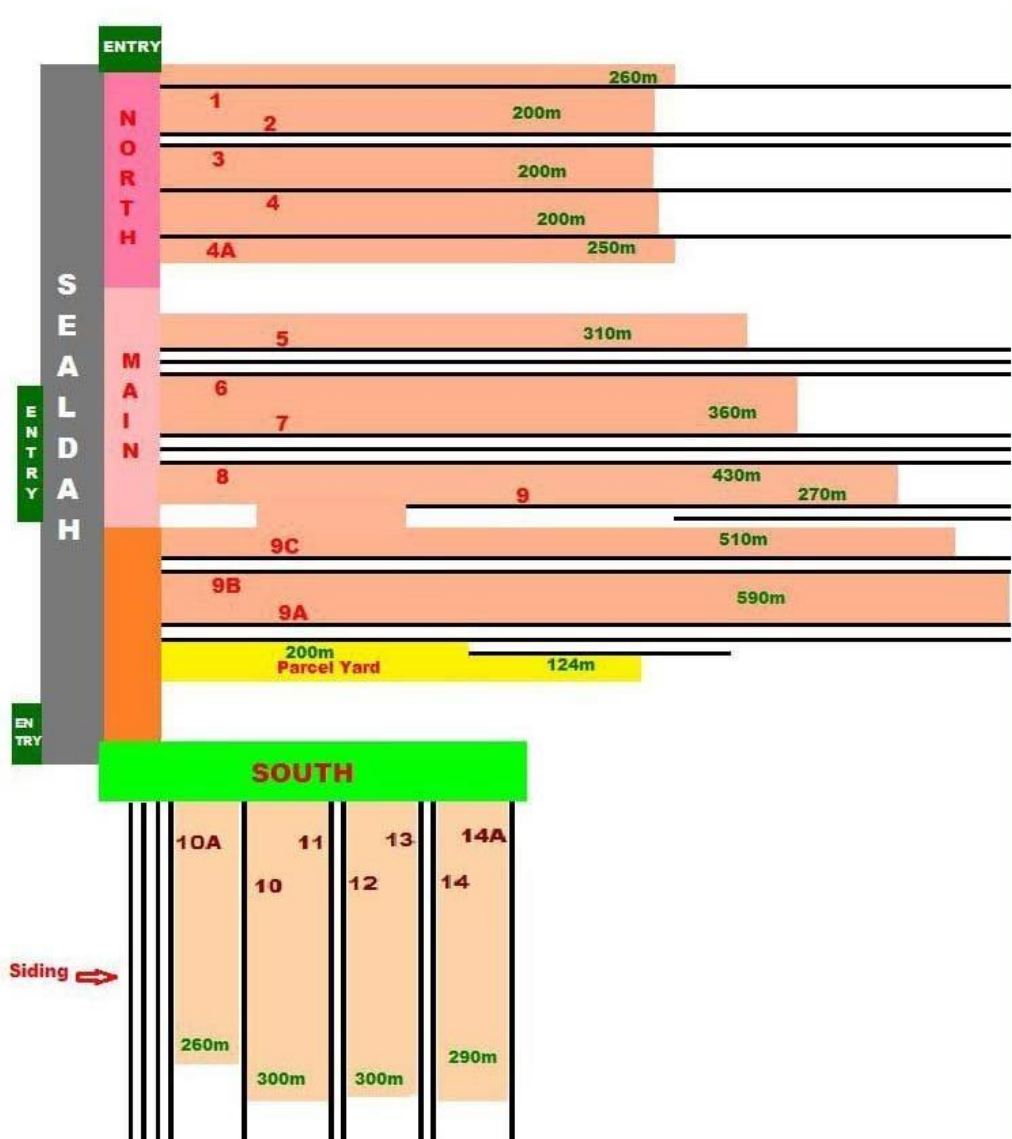
Appendix 1

List of Figures

1.1 Previous overview of in and around Sealdah Station area Sketch taken from MPhil thesis[60]

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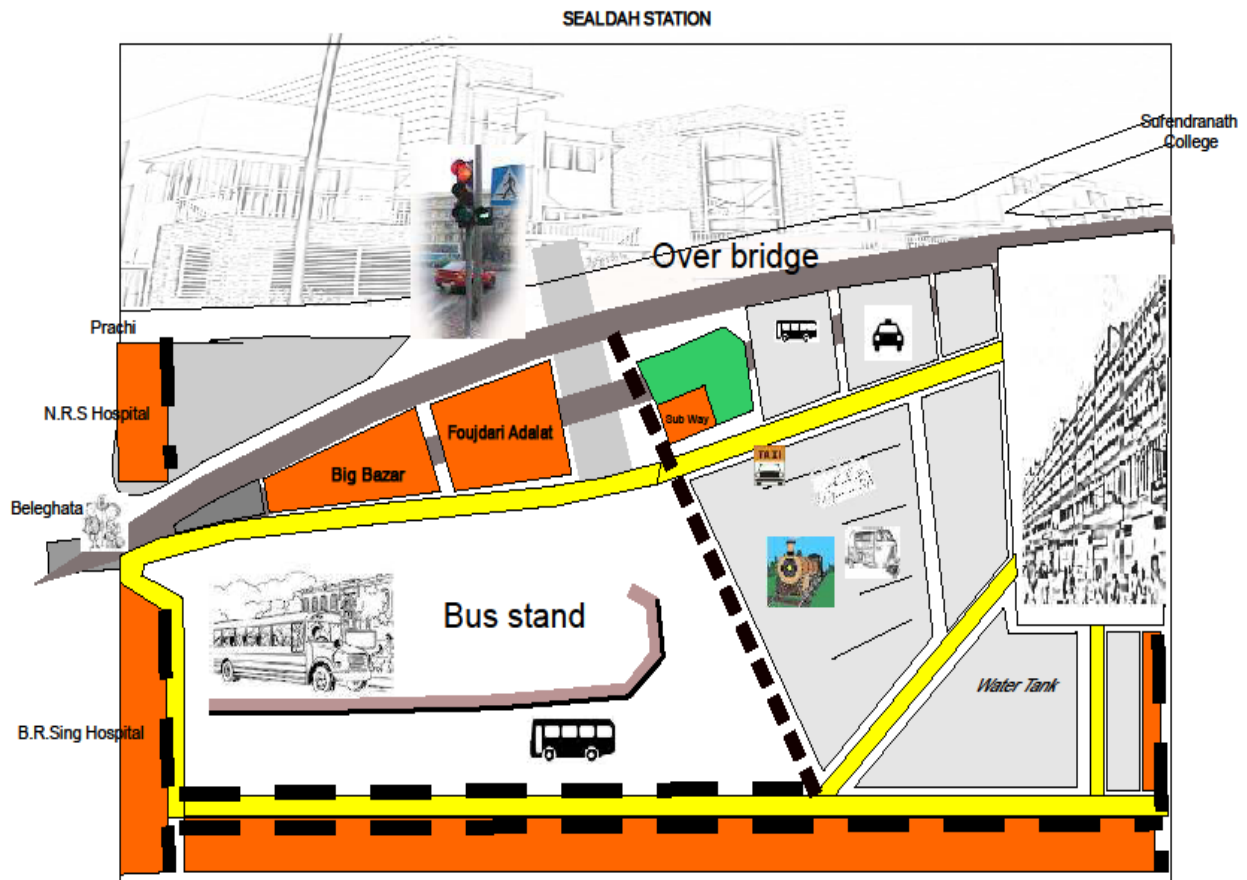
[60] (Das) Paul, A. 2012. *Exploring the Lives of Working Children Living on Streets: A Study of Kolkata City*. IDSK, Kolkata.
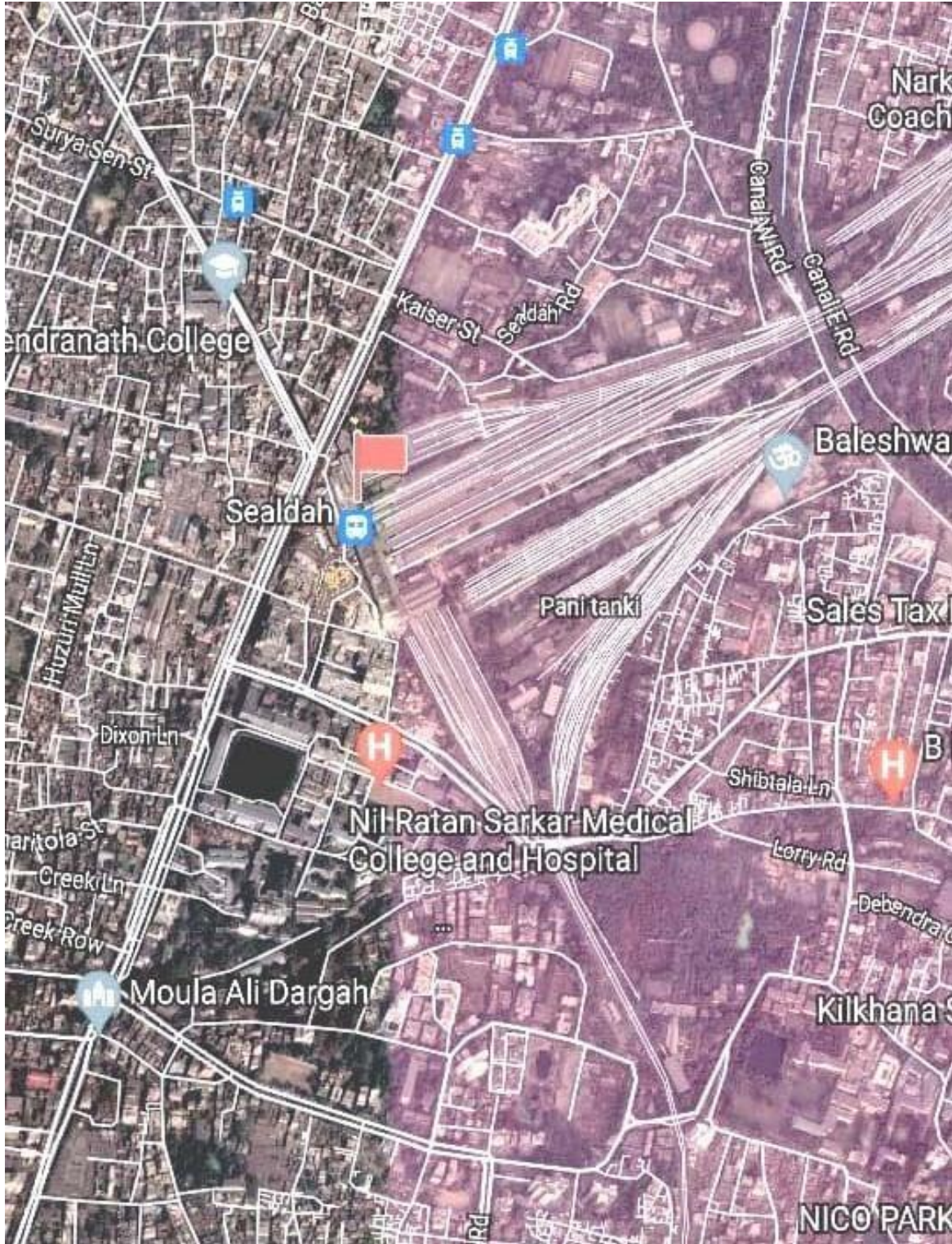
1.2 Key locations where I could interact with street children

Appendix 2
List of Maps
2.1 Five Km radius centering Sealdah Station (birds eye view)

2.2. Areas where street children roam, work and live (mostly after the drive of making street children free railway station)

Appendix 3
List of Photographs

3.1 Sealdah Railway Station

3.2 Changed look of Sealdah Station
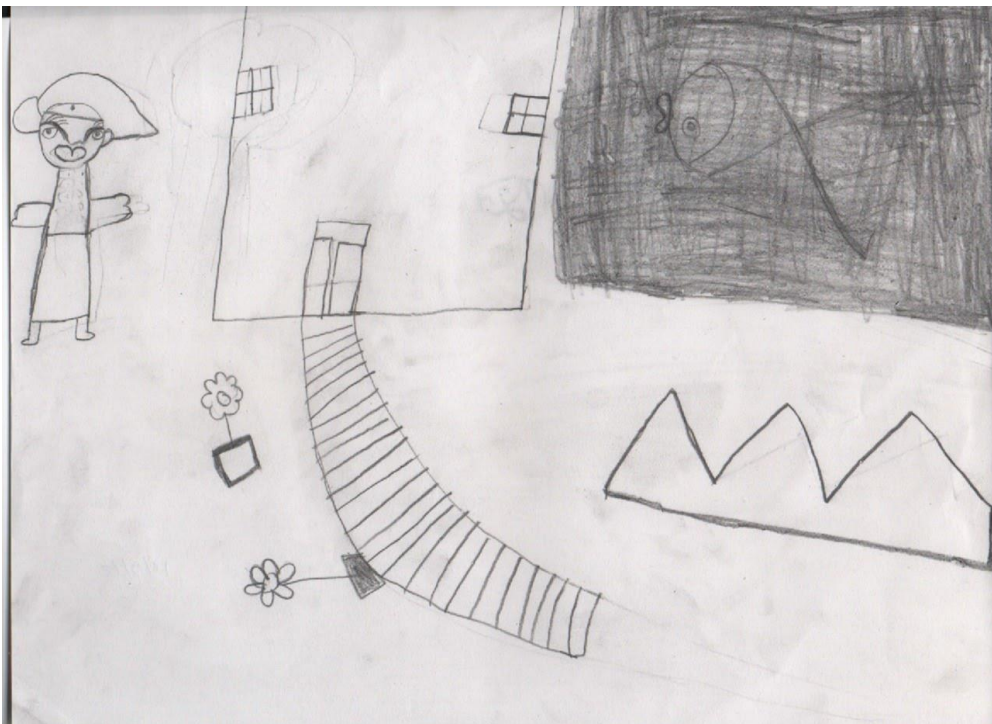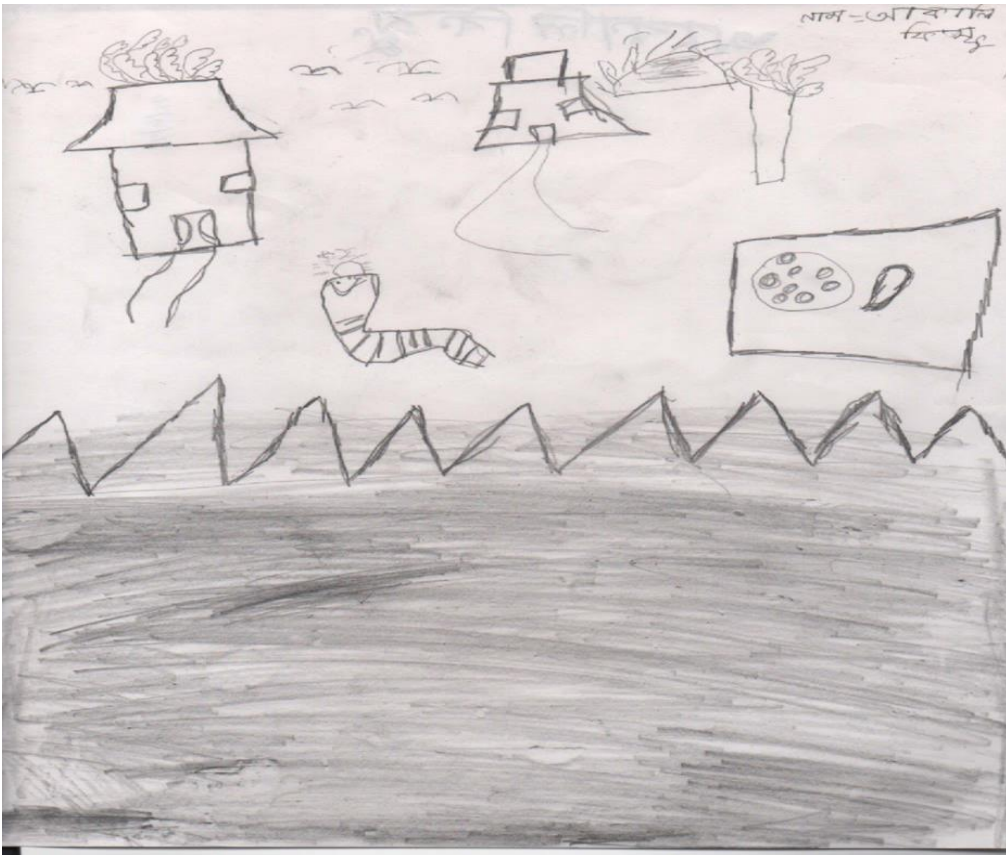
3.2.1 Inside Sealdah Station

3.2.2 Outside Sealdah station

3.3 Koley Market

3.4 Drawing developed by the children during Play-Activity

3.5 Surrogate-family relationship: child helping surrogate mother in selling vegetables

3.6 Intra-Group Dynamics: Playing with friends

3.7 Inter-Group Dynamics: Discussions within leaders of different groups to solve an issue

3.8   Open shelter

3.9 CHILDLINE facility available inside Sealdah Station

3.10 Poster of CHILDLINE

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