

STREET CHILDREN AND THEIR ACTIVITY SPACES IN KOLKATA: A GEOGRAPHICAL APPRAISAL

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Street children related with the urban spaces in the developing world represent a sad outcome of the rapid urbanization process. These children have to cope with the new situation every day. They adopt or develop many complex livelihood strategies and a variety of different informal or even illegal activities in public space and form supportive social networks in order to survive in street life with family or without family. Street children use the different suitable urban spaces as their earning, living, entertaining spot. The livelihoods of young people on the street should be analyzed in relation to the spaces they use based on their age and length of stay on the streets i.e. the activity space. An activity is generally characterized as a geographic extent in which people move in the course of their daily activities. It is related with space and time. The present study is an analysis of the routine or daily life on chosen locations (activity spaces) of urban street children, i.e. their spatial lives and their working strategies. The overall aim of this study is to describe the activity spaces of the sampled street children.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of street children is considered as an urban problem. United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and other international agencies tend to define street children based on the frequency of their timing on the street and degree of contact they usually maintain with their families (Knaul, 1995). We can find some vagabond children on the railway station complex, along the river, near the temples, in markets, under the bridges, near the bus stand, along the railway track etc. in Kolkata city area. Many of them are exposed to serious forms of exploitation. They have little or no ability to come out of the situation. The problem of street children is one of the burning social disturbances in many developing countries.

The UNICEF (2012) cites the incidence of a street population as an outcome of the inability of urban planning to accommodate the rapid inflow of people into a city. They constitute a marginalized population in most urban centers of the world.

Poverty is the main cause for their migration from home (Bratter and Forrest 1985). In addition, the breakdown of traditional family values, educational zeal, and community structure leaves a large number of children without necessary care and support for their sound growth and development. Among the developing countries of the world, India is home to the world's largest population of street children, estimated eighteen million (UNESCO Report 2003). In India, the phenomenon of street children is an outcome of complex interplay of various factors. Rapid urbanization, migration, high rate of unemployment, rural urban migration, and increasing poverty results in increasing number of children on the streets. Like other metropolitan cities, Kolkata is also facing the difficulties related

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to street children. This paper tries to explore the lifestyle of street living children and analyse the different livelihood practices in different activity spaces adopted by them using the urban public province. These geographical spaces are their places of work, sleep, recreation, as well as a place of learning, socialization, and personal enrichment (Ennew and Swart-Kruger 2003).

Conceptual Background on Activity Space

Time geography theory emphasizes the impact of individual space-time concept on activity space. Lennrope (1999) explains time geography as a multifaceted idea that links space and time regularities with human actions. A more recent work by Schonfelder and Axhausen (2010) characterizes activity space as a compound concept that can be approached through different perspectives. In addition, activity space has also been investigated in social geography to analyze socio-cultural exposure. For example, Perchoux, et. al. (2013) provides a comprehensive review on conceptualization of activity space in relation to mobility and discusses how public health research may benefit from the understanding of individual activity spaces.

Methodology and Database

This is a cross sectional qualitative study conducted in seven zones, which are highly street children concentrated in the Kolkata Municipal Corporation of West Bengal. A sample of 441 street children aged between 6 to 18 years has been analysed; the survey is carried out during the year 2016. Since it is hard to find street children due to their mobile nature, snowball-sampling method is applied. The primary data have been obtained from a scheduled semi-structured questionnaire and secondary data has been collected from concerned NGOs.

Statement of the Problem

Street children are a major problem in an urban area. The growth of the economy, rapid industrialization and urbanization the increasing opportunities in the urban sector often becomes the pull factor for most of the people including the children living in rural and backward regions of the country. The main objectives of the study are to find out the following:

- The reasons behind the children being on the street;
- to find out the different livelihood strategies adopted by street children and
- to analyse the activity spaces adopted by the street children in their daily livelihood

STUDY AREA

This study was conducted in seven zones of Kolkata Municipal Corporation where street children are highly concentrated. The details of the study area are given below in Table 1.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

UNESCO (1997) deciphered the phenomenon of street children by identifying certain causes, which include rapid and uncontrolled urban population explosion, family disintegration, and unemployment. However if we clearly look at the phenomenon, it goes beyond poverty. Often the combination of several phenomena gives rise to the problems of street children. The child on the street is the product of a chain of events beginning at home (McLoyd, V. C. 1998).

Causes of Phenomenon of Street Children

Street children being on the street is not only because of poverty, and the need to earn irregular incomes but also due to domestic violence and abuses which are often carried out by parents or relatives (James and James, 2012). According to the Consortium for Street Children (2003), family breakup is the major cause of the street children phenomenon. As a whole, children turn to the street for a complex and multiplicity of reasons. Poverty, urbanization, modernization, and industrialization are the major factors affecting their life. Rubenson (2005) points out other factors such as separation of parents, family tensions, death of parent/s, ill treatment by stepparents, selling of children as bonded labourers, etc. Natural and man-made hazards are also responsible for street children. The sample survey reveals that apart from poverty, domestic or family related problems, the case of children whose parents either remarried/divorced/eloped or were addicted to alcohol, was crucial. Personal freedom, the need for monetary independence, and the lure of the city were some other reasons for moving out of home (Table 2).

About one-tenth of the slum population in India is from West Bengal and Kolkata being the state capital and the only metropolitan city in eastern India, huge inflow of migrants is found in Kolkata. It creates shanties and slums in this city. The children of these families spend most of their time on the street situation in search of better life option.

Living Condition of the Children

After escaping from home, most of the children are under very poor conditions of living. The most important characteristics of these children are that they live alone in streets and without proper or reliable shelter (Lugala and Mbwambo, 1999). They prefer the Rail Station area for living because of ready availability of sources of water, shade, and different working opportunities. Street children are required to fend for themselves every moment of time. Research has shown that there are surprising similarities between the working activities carried out by street children all over the world, whether the economy is agriculturally or industrially based (Black, 1993). From the survey, it is learnt, that most of the children are engaged in different types of marginalized and unorganized activities to survive in their daily life. The children usually live in a harsh living environment with no scheduled time of bathing or eating. Children do not brush their teeth, cut their hair or nails, and wash their clothes regularly. Street children have remarkable survival instincts and boldness in daily struggle of street life (Verma, 1999).

Activity Spaces and Street Children

Activity places/spaces are generally defined as the geographic extent in which people move in the course of their daily activities. It is rooted in concern with human activity participation and mobility that are defined in the realm of space and time. The spatial structure of activity space relates to where people choose to undertake their daily activities. The choice of activity locations can be viewed as an outcome of spatial learning processes through which people interact with their surrounding environments. Street children always adopt different spaces of activity in urban set-up.

Urban Livelihoods in Public Space and Activity Space in Kolkata City

How the street children accomplish their basic needs using the public space in urban area is very critical. The public space of the city fulfils many different functions of the street children. It is their place of work, sleep, recreation, as well as a place of learning, socialization, and personal enrichment (Ennew and Swart-Kruger 2003). In Kolkata city, there are several places, where street children are very much active. These places are 'activity spaces' for them. From the Table 3, eight broad activity spaces of street children can be identified, where these children try to live a better

life. Among all the activity spaces in the city, railway stations are highly crowded with the street children. Rail stations not only provide shelter, food, water, and toilet facilities but also produce some easy income generating opportunities. According to the senior street children, NGO officials and other stakeholders they always love to stay in the places where food is available. Some of them use different activity spaces, while some are confined within one space for survival. In terms of security most of the children said that they like better to live in a small group in their preferred places. This not only provides them with companionship but also comfort of security (Table 3).

Social Practice and Territorial Concept

Street children do not operate haphazardly in the urban environment. Different groups have different zones or areas in which they operate and any interference by another group can cause serious trouble between the groups. These zoning areas of operation within the city, limits competition for resources among the children and ensure their survival. This is the evidence of their highly organized activities.

According to the NGO officials, these children tend to follow the normal pulse of urban or city life. They usually wake up in the morning and spread out to the streets for their survival. Learning from the senior children's experiences and stakeholders it can be said that their urban movements are strategic. They frequently visit religious places, market place, and station area. Street children know by their street experiences that from these places at particular times they can easily collect their needs.

Preferred Working Activity Space

The interaction has been carried out among one hundred ten working street children in different areas of Kolkata with the help of 'ecological interview process' (Mason et al., 2004). It is revealed from the Table 4 that railway stations are the most preferred places among the street children (46%) as an activity space, followed by the market area (22%), garbage vat (13%), river side area (8%), religious place (6%) respectively. The Table 4 elaborates the preferred activity spaces in the study area.

WORKING STRATEGIES

Most of the Indian street children are working children. These working children are not trained in any vocational course, but are also denied the education or any rehabilitation process that could enable them to escape the poverty trap (Hassani, 2008). Like other parts of India, street children of Kolkata are engaged in different survival activities using their activity spaces. Most of the children involve in waste material collection as rag pickers (like empty bottles, plastic packets, waste paper etc.). Other survival activities are: goods loading and unloading from trains or in market area, raw vegetables vending beside Koley market and Barabazar, helper in food stall or as a labour in leather workshop. They use the public urban landscape as their working activity zone. They also use public space as a means to assert their independent identities, identify, and appropriate different urban alcoves to use for survival and recreation (Van Blerk 2005; Beazley 2003).

The field survey reveals that most of the street children work as rag pickers (114) in areas like Sealdah, Park Circus, Barabazar. In the same areas, they also involve as porters (63). Besides that, many children engage as labourers in leatherwork in Topsia, Tiljala, Tangra, Raja Bazar and Park Circus (23). From the interaction with the children, NGO officials and different stakeholders it is evident that the railway station areas are the most preferred places among the street children that creates many unorganized and easy job opportunities for children. Many children of station area and outside assemble here to grab the job opportunity for their survival (Table 5).

CONCLUDING OBSERVATION

The problems of street children are very much familiar everywhere both in developed and developing countries. Due to lack of permanent shelter and the fact that the number of street children is not recorded in any national survey or study, street children are often called the 'hidden children'. Being hidden, they are at a high risk of being abused, exploited, and neglected. It is very clear from the study that untidy urban environment, ignorance, abuse make them restless and rude, and drive them to the world of addiction and other criminal activities. Involving in different survival activities, these children get neither any vocational training nor basic education hence forcing them to confine within the trap of poverty. The street children are indeed a special group of children needing special protection because of their vulnerability.

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