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## **STREET CHILDREN: A SOCIALLY EXCLUDED COMMUNITY**

### **Introduction**

United Nations estimates that children and youth account for nearly half the world's population (Ansell 2005). Furthermore, while two-thirds of the world's total population inhabits Third World countries, the Third World accounts for 90% of 0-17 year olds and 85% of 15-24 year-olds (United Nations 2001). Around 35% of India's population is under twenty years of age, and yet, in a recent study Gabriele Alex reports that in ethnographic studies in India, children and youth are hardly represented. Sociological and anthropological childhood studies in developing countries are quite rare and the few that exist are mostly confined to the context of developmental policy strategies (Alex 2009). According to James and Prout (1998) there is a lack of studies which give priority of focus to children. The understanding of the child as a social person in his or her right on the basis of his or her perception and actions in the social and cultural world is still often neglected.

Despite the recent recognition of the value of children's voices, there is still a dearth of studies that elicit the views of children. As a consequence, key issues for research continue to be ascertained from an adult perspective and children's experiences and perceptions of homelessness remain under-reported (Keys 2009). UNICEF coined the term and included homeless children in 'children in especially difficult circumstances' along with those who are orphaned, living and working on the streets, affected by conflict and disabilities, or suffering from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. United Nations Children's Fund (1986) bases the identification of street children on the availability of shelter for them and their level of contact with their families. They classify street children into three categories: First, children who have continuous family contact but who stay with their parents on the public pavements in urban areas; working children who spend all their days and some of their nights on the streets and in public places, but who have occasional family contact. Second, children on the street: children such as orphans, runaways, refugees, and displaced persons who do not have any contact with

their families. Third, children of the street: they live alone in streets, without proper and secure shelter, have lost contact with their parents and due to this are missing out on the parental protection, love and care; they are the most crucial group as they do not have any protection from the vagaries of nature and society.

While this classification helps to broadly classify and identify the street children, there still exist numerous overlaps in these categories. This is main reason that the number reported by studies varies. According to UNICEF, there are about 25 million street children in Asia and an estimated 10 million in Africa (1998). India is home to one-fifth of the world's children and has the largest population of street children in the world. In 1994, there was an estimated 11 million street-living and street-working children in India (United Nations Children's Fund 2010). Estimates often vary in relation to how a mobile population of children is counted and, most importantly, exactly who is considered for inclusion, because the term street children has different meanings in different regions (Panter-Brick 2002).

In Puducherry, a Union Territory in South India and the region in which this research is undertaken, the total population is 973,829 (Census of India 2001). Among the four districts of the Union Territory, Puducherry is the largest district with a population of 735,332 followed by Karaikal, Mahe and Yanam. In 2001, Puducherry District had 195,434 children under the age of 15 years, with 58,027 children living in the urban areas. The Census of India defines 'houseless population' as the persons who are not living in 'census houses'. A census house is identified as 'a structure with roof. Possible places where the houseless population is likely to live are noted, such as "on the roadside, pavements, under staircases or in the open, temples, platforms and the like" (Census of India 1991: 64). Following these criteria, in 2001 census, the total urban homeless population in India is 778,599 and rural homeless population is 1,164,877.

There are numerous studies that focus on the present condition of the children, their health, backgrounds and difficulties they face on the streets, but very few that narrate their experiences and thoughts about their future. A study based in Bangalore city by Nieuwenhuizen (2006) focuses on the perception of the children, their views of on what they consider their problems, the difficulties they face and how they confront them.

Given the fact that very few researches have been carried out to study the situation of children and even lesser on 'children in especially difficult situation', the present research topic was chosen in order to provide some form of recognition and voice to this neglected category. There are various studies conducted in India, but they are mainly confined to big cities like Chennai, Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore; and none as per my knowledge focuses on the lives of homeless children in smaller cities like Pondicherry. Even though

Puducherry is a small union territory and the number of homeless children is less, it was observed that the difficulties faced by children are not unique but similar to those faced by children in bigger cities in India; or in any other part of the world. The lack of studies on children and even lesser studies which are based in Puducherry has influenced the need for this study.

### **Street children as socially excluded community**

There are various reasons which lead to a rise in the number of homeless population; these may be poverty, high unemployment rates, rapid urbanization, family break-ups, armed conflicts, migration from rural to urban areas, increasing disparities in wealth, and natural and man-made disasters. The significance of the concept of social exclusion is its approach that looks at social exclusion as deprivation that is multidimensional where the outcome of deprivation is related through a process to other forms of deprivation. The approach thus emphasizes the process of exclusion and not just the outcomes. Using this concept in understanding the level of exclusion faced by children without homes is more useful than just looking at the outcome where the children outside parental protection are not safe. A social exclusion perspective draws attention to the extent to which a child has the opportunity to participate in the mainstream society via the integrating systems such as the economy, family and friends, voluntary organizations and the state (Berghman 1995). Children are part of the social system and healthy social ties are important both for individuals and society as a whole (Feinstein and Sabates 2006; Scott et al 2001). "Individual children whose social ties are ruptured or weakened often suffer as a result; for example, the links between educational difficulties, poor health, relationship breakdown and anti-social behavior are well established" (Axford 2008: 3). According to Silver, some of the dimensions of exclusion include:

a livelihood; secure, permanent employment; earnings; property, credit, or land; housing; minimal or prevailing consumption levels; education, skills, and cultural capital; the welfare state; citizenship and legal equality; democratic participation; public goods; the nation or the dominant race; family and sociability; humanity, respect, fulfillment and understanding (1995: 60).

Homeless children as a community is deprived of family, secure housing, and a consequence of that they are further deprived of education. This according to Silver's definition will term them as a socially excluded community. The term 'social exclusion' is a relatively new term (Sen 2000). The invention of the term social exclusion is attributed to Rene Lenoir, then Secrétaire d'Etat à l'Action Sociale in the Chirac government, who published *Les Exclus: Un Français sur dix* in 1974. To identify 'the excluded' in France, René Lenoir, spoke of the following people as constituting the excluded groups, this constituted a tenth of the French population: "mentally and physically handicapped, suicidal people, aged invalids, abused children, substance abusers, delinquents, single parents, multi-problem households, marginal,

asocial persons, and other social misfits” (Silver 1995: 63). In another instance, social exclusion has been defined as “the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live” (European Foundation 1995: 4). It is seen as the opposite of social integration, mirroring the perceived importance of being part of society and being included (de Haan 2001).

According to the definitions and the categories mentioned above, it is evident that the street and the homeless children constitute an excluded group in our society. There is an urgent need to study this group and understand how separation from home leads to the other dimensions of exclusion and how the children perceive and deal with their situation. The following study is thus targeted to study the group of socially excluded children in the city of Puducherry, with the intention to understand how this exclusion from home affects the children, and exploring here the multi-dimensional and relational deprivation resulting from this exclusion.

The objective is to understand how the children are affected when they leave the parental home, are found by police or staff at child care institutions and become dependent on these child care institutions. It will attempt to investigate into the protection and security, both tangible and intangible that the child was receiving at home and what he/she is availing now at the child care institutions. This could be in form of the opportunity for education or the lifestyle of children. It will also look into the psychological effect this exclusion has on the child, in terms of identifying and understanding the multi-dimensional aspect of exclusion and highlighting the constitutive and instrumental dimensions of exclusion.

## **Methodology**

The study was conducted in a child care institution which takes care of homeless and street children and provides food and shelter for them. It is one of the many government registered child care institutions in Pondicherry and licensed by the Social Welfare Department of the Pondicherry Government. According to the Ministry of Women and Child Development’s Sub Group Report on Child Protection for the Eleventh Five Year Plan, 2007-2012, children in difficult circumstances include the following; “homeless children (pavement dwellers, displaced/evicted, etc.), refugee and migrants children, orphaned or abandoned and destitute children, children whose parents cannot or are not able to take care of them, street and working children, child beggars, victims of child marriage, trafficked children, child prostitutes, children of prostitutes, children of prisoners, children affected by conflict/civil strike, children affected by disasters both natural and man-made, children affected by substance abuse, HIV/AIDS and other terminal diseases, disabled children, children belonging to ethnic, religious minorities and other socially marginalized groups, the girl child, children in conflict with law (those who commit crimes), children who

are victims of crime.” The Ministry of Women and Child Development in 2009-10 introduced a comprehensive scheme, the ‘Integrated Child Protection Scheme’ (ICPS) under which financial and technical support is provided to the State Governments/UT Administrations. ICPS brings several existing child protection programmes under one umbrella. These include (i) Programme for Juvenile Justice (ii) An Integrated Programme for Street Children and (iii) Scheme for Assistance to Homes (Shishu Greh) to promote adoption (Ministry of Women and Child Development 2012). There are three institutions taking care of the street children in Puducherry under the scheme ‘*Integrated Programme for Street Children*’ with an aim to fulfill the governmental goal of ‘Prevention of destitution and withdrawal of children from a life on the street and their placement into national mainstream’. The objective of this scheme is ‘provisions for shelter, nutrition, health care, sanitation and hygiene, safe drinking water, education and recreational facilities and protection against abuse and exploitation to destitute and neglected street children’. Since its inception in 1998 as many as 250,938 street children have benefited from this scheme through 214 voluntary organizations in 24 States/Union Territories as reported by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (2006).

The chosen child care institution takes care and accommodates nearly 60 boys and girls, some of which reside there and some are children of working parents who stay during the day and return home at night to their parents. The main building, or ‘centre’, is based in an old Tamil house near the centre of Pondicherry; and serves as the boys’ hostel and Open School. The crèche and the girls’ hostel are nearby in a small house. This institution began in 1995 with the intention to improve the lives of street and working children, particularly rag pickers and children who had run away from home. It supports children from a variety of disadvantaged backgrounds, including those who have been abandoned, orphans, victims of abuse and exploitation, children who have run away from their families and those who have suffered extreme poverty compelling them to beg on the streets. This paper is an outcome of the field work conducted in the year 2010. Frequent visits to the institution helped in getting acquainted with the staff and developing amiable relations with the children which was extremely important. The friendly rapport between the children and the researcher; persuaded the children to feel less threatened by the researcher and the questions thereafter posed.

The study used four approaches for this qualitative research; Basic Interpretive, Case Study, Ethnography and Narrative Analysis. Through these qualitative approaches, data was collected through participant observation, analysis of documents and unstructured interviews. Participant observation, interviews and group discussions were conducted to understand how the children have been adversely affected and socially excluded after they left their parental home. To understand the daily life of the children and the working of the child care institutions, the method of participant observation

was employed. This included taking part in their day-to-day activities, weekend visits for excursion to playgrounds and beach, sharing meals and assisting them with the routine work and as Malinowski would have termed, to understand the *'imponderabilia of actual life'* (Malinowski 1922:18). For the comfort of children, interviews were unstructured and conducted through conversation technique which helped to inquire and understand the aspirations of the children. Group discussions were conducted to understand the collective feelings of children. Furthermore, the study used the child care institution's records to inquire into the life history of the child and family, which were later correlated with the interviews.

## Results

It was noted that the children living in this child care institution, among other factors, were mostly abandoned by their parents, or they had run away from their families voluntarily. Following Nye and Edelbrock (1980) and Richter (1989) who have classified the street children as comprising of two different categories, they were either 'runaways' or 'throwaways'. Runaways are the children who voluntarily leave parental home without permission. Throwaways are those who leave home because their parents have actually encouraged them to leave, have abandoned them, or have subjected them to abuse and neglect (Le Roux 1996).

All the children in the child care institution could be categorized into the following broad categories-

- Children intentionally left on streets by family. The mostly probable reason was the financial crisis at home, undesired child left by the mother, step parents who dislike the child and leave the child on the streets away from home.
- Children intentionally left at the child care institutions by family. Financial crisis is the most common reason for such behaviour by parents, and in certain cases the occupation of the mother/father which takes them away from the city and where they cannot take the child with them.
- Children who were genuinely lost on the streets. This was very common and noted mostly with children under the age of five who were misplaced on the streets with no intention by parents of leaving them. They are also unable to remember their residence address.
- Children who ran away from home due to family problems. The reasons were violence at home by parents or step parents, pressure of parents to study or work, and in result the rebellious attitude of the children which makes them run away from their home.

- Run away children or those who were lost and whose families have been identified and thus rehabilitated back. Once the child was found either by police, or the child care institution staff, an effort was made to find the parents of the child. This was done by publishing advertisement in the local newspapers with the child's photo. Many young children have been rehabilitated with their parents successfully using this approach.

Children who run away from home had a higher tendency to engage in petty crimes and anti-social activities. They are influenced by adults or older street children who often force them to commit crime and engage in substance abuse. This was evident as a lot of young boys were substance addicts while they were living on the streets and before they came to the child care institution. This was seen in the case of Nagaraj and Anbu who were rag-pickers in Puducherry, and who claim that their tobacco addiction started when while collecting trash they found leftover cigarettes and *beedi*. They were found drunk sleeping in front of a cinema by the child care institution staff. Nagaraj was 15 years old, had no knowledge about his family background and Anbu also 15 years old had run away from home. Both of them were addicted to alcohol and *beedi* and looked very weak and malnourished. They earned money by collecting and selling old newspapers and empty beer bottles. They slept at the railway platform in order to start work at 4AM which involved collecting newspapers and bottles. All the money which was earned was spent on *Ganja* (marijuana) and alcohol. *Ganja* was purchased from an area called Muthialpet at a price of Rs. 5 per packet. Their only recreation was watching films in cinema. It is also possible that the child intentionally does not disclose details about his/her family in order to avoid going back to them. This is common in situations where the child has intentionally left home. Once the children leave their parental home, they are exposed to the harsh realities and encounter people who take advantage of them. Also, when they leave, they deprive themselves of the affection and the safe environment they were entitled to at home. Baker and Panter-Brick (2000) state that a child is entitled to have a safe and secure environment and caring parents, only then a child can develop to his/her full potential, in terms of educational achievement, economic security, healthy attachments and lack of anti-social activities.

Regarding the violence that a child goes through, it was noted that children are not only exposed to the violence outside after leaving homes, but in various situations also experience or observe violence within the confines of their own homes, educational institutions, work place and the community. This exposure to violence not only affects their physical health and safety, but also their psychological adjustment, social relations, and academic achievement. The impact of this violence may have long term or short term repercussions, which are damaging for the child and his/her healthy development. Many children run away from home because of violence inflicted on them or due to the authoritarian behaviour by their parents. Children often

have a tendency to rebel and as a sign of that, run away from home. After interacting with children and the child care institution staff, it was evident that children who have run away once, are more likely to run away for the second time; either from other child care institutions or from their home, and this eventually acts as a catalyst to prevent them from living at their parental home. In a recent editorial in *Economic and Political Weekly* (2013) mentioning in detail about the situation of missing children in the country, it is pointed out that majority of the children who are missing 'come from poor and illiterate or semi-literate backgrounds and are trafficked into child labour, illegal activities, prostitution, begging and domestic service'. The child often runs away from the home for rebel behaviour, as noted in the Child Care Institution, and is in a threat and high chances to meet people who are willing to exploit them. This often induces him into petty crimes and substance abuse also.

Children who stay in child care institutions are entitled to an environment conducive for education. They go to school regularly along with other children and this ensures their regular education. Regardless of the fact if they have had an opportunity for being educated at their parental homes or not, the children in child care institutions have an opportunity where they can pursue their schooling. The child care institution pays for their education and provides them with uniform, books and other study materials. This helps broaden their spectrum of knowledge and helps them acquire a sense of autonomy over their life outside their parental homes. Once the parents give up the responsibility of the child, it is the responsibility of the child care institution to provide the children with a safe environment and satisfy their needs. The child care institution ensures that the children are healthy, provides them food, secure shelter and clean clothes. Healthy and nutritious food is provided to all children, which is prepared in the child care institution by the staff. The organization also provides children with a sense of safety. The structure of the organization gives them a feeling of home and a sense of secure living.

Even though the child care institution provides and satisfies all the physiological needs of a child, there are certain needs which it cannot cater. Children, who live in these child care institution along with other children from similar life situations, tend to create new social familial relations with other children. This kinship construction is a clear demonstration that deprivation of normal childhood through the absence of parental care at home, results in feelings of deprivation of emotional needs of love and care. An important finding which came out due to interactions and interviews with the children and the care takers was that children tend to create fictitious family members and family backgrounds. They tend to exclude their parents or any other relative from their definition of a family if they have experienced harsh and violent behaviour from them. The children create new relations and bonds of kinship with other children at the child care institution.



Interestingly it was found that no children claimed fictive relations with the adults who took care of them in the child care institutions. This shows how they can differentiate between those who belong to similar life situations and those who do not. More clearly they consider the children with them to share more or less similar stories and are so able to share their feeling and develop kinship relations with them. Importance is placed on the quality of a relationship, that is, the care, love and support which they have experienced from the relation, rather than the actual structural relationship. This trend was seen during interaction with Rukmani (17 years old). During conversations with Rukmani, whenever asked about her family, she mentioned that her family lives in France and visits her once a year. She talks in detail about her family, about her father, mother and two brothers. She talks about her future and going back to her family in France once she finishes her school. She confirms this belief to the researcher with some photos displayed on the walls. The reality was known much later, while during interviews with the caretakers, and later reconfirming with the office records, it was established that Rukmani's mother is a commercial sex worker in Pondicherry and frequently visits her. She left Rukmani at this institution at the age of four, to go to Mumbai in search of work. The care takers confirmed the fact by saying Rukmani is aware of these facts. The tendency to hide family details and invent new and fictitious relations is because of the stigma attached to certain occupations like in this instance, commercial sex workers.

Another example to emphasize this was noted during interactions with Andrew who is 7 years old and tells that he came to the organization a year back. According to him, Shakti, another boy in the organization is his brother. Shakti also agrees to this fact. Andrew adds that he came here because his mother dropped him to another organization, which later left him here. He says that his mother doesn't come to visit because she doesn't know where he is living. During interactions with the staff of the organization, it was found that Andrew's parents had died due to drug addiction and he came to this organization three years back. It can be understood that this imaginary relationship of brotherhood between Andrew and Shakti is constructed by them in order to develop a sense of family and belonging within the children. This also gives them a feeling of security and a sense of family.

A child tends to create new family relations and stories in situations where he/she is embarrassed by their family background. A child senses the need to present himself in a certain way to the researcher and other people. This trend of creating and believing in an imaginary family reflects the fact that the absence of normal childhood and parental affection for the child can never be substituted by the child care institutions. This trend clearly affirms that even though the child care institutions may offer physical comfort to the child, hygienic environment, healthy food, proper schooling; they are not able to satisfy the emotional requirements of a child provided by a family. Therefore,

the exclusion from parental home affects the child psychologically and hampers healthy development. The impact on the children due to the absence of families is immense and can never be satisfied by the child care institutions or any other form of support provided by the government since the child always feels the absence of parents and to overcome this absence develops fictitious relationships with the children he interacts with.

Even though it is important to study the effects on homelessness on children, another equally important aspect which needs to be looked into is the reasons and situations under which children become homeless. There is an urgent need to have provisions which may prevent such instances and therefore curb the possible rise of situations where the children become homeless and eventually, a socially excluded community.

**Table 1**  
**Houseless Population in India - 2001**

	Urban homeless population	Rural homeless population	Total homeless population
Pondicherry	1,468	194	1,662
India	778,599	1,164,877	1,943,476

Source: Census of India, 2001

**Table 2**  
**Houseless Households in India - 2001**

	Urban Houseless Households	Rural Houseless Households	Total Houseless Households
Pondicherry	629	81	710
India	187,810	259,775	447,585

Source: Census of India, 2001

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