Negotiating Identity: Challenging Society’s Perception of ‘Street Children’

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Abstract

This dissertation is a study of ‘street children’ in the Indian context. While they have captured enormous attention since the late 1980s and early 1990s, ‘street children’ are hardly heard or listened to. The unchallenged assumption about them as ‘hapless victims’ or ‘delinquents’ weakens their position in relation to the society.

Addressing the power-relations of society in which ‘street children’ find themselves, this study makes an attempt to contrast how they perceive themselves with the perception of society towards them. I argue, any attempt to ameliorate the lives of ‘street children’ will require an understanding of them in relation to the larger society, empowering them in terms of engaging in dialogue with stakeholders, thus negotiating their identity, and challenging society’s perception towards them.
Chapter 1: Introduction

‘Street children’ are visible, they are seen everywhere but they are not heard or listened to. People have little idea of what their lives are like, what choices they make, what they like and how they see their future. They are often treated as a ‘problem’, which requires a solution. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the subject of ‘street children’ has captured enormous attention, starting from top-headlines of newspapers to human rights issues to the evening news (Hecht, 1998, p3).

Consequently, two approaches directed towards ‘street children’ have developed: ‘rescue-oriented’ and ‘rights-oriented’. The ‘rescue’ approach victimizes street children as ‘abnormal’, ‘lacking childhood’, ‘children out of place’, and thus ‘out of childhood’, ‘restoring’ to them a lost childhood, or saving them from the terrestrial hell of street life (Ennew, 1994 and Hecht, 1998). Contrary to the ‘rescue’ approach, ‘rights’ approach views them as competent social actors, capable and deserving of expressing opinions and acting autonomously, who should be treated as individuals with rights of their own rather than as passive objects of pity (Schofield and Thoburn, 1996 in Pattisson, 1999). In this context of opposing approaches to ‘street children’, I argue that when programmes following ‘rights approach’ aim to empower ‘street children’ with the skills and knowledge, preparing them for the productive markets and live a respected life, the success of such ‘empowerment programme’ would be jeopardized if society’s perception towards street children is not challenged. This paper will aim to establish the above thesis by providing a better understanding of how ‘street children’ are embedded within the social structures and relations in a particular context.
The second chapter discusses the conceptual ambiguity in defining ‘street children’, problematizing the approach that looks for the ‘causes’ of the ‘street child’ phenomenon, and develops strategies based on universal ‘shared characteristics’, rather than looking at the unique circumstances that apply to the individual environments within which children are negotiating their lives. The third chapter analyses ‘street children’ in relation to the dominant idea of childhood, which is central to the debates in which ‘street children’ are entangled. The fourth chapter places ‘street children’ in the particular context of India and analyses how the notion of ‘street children’ challenges the existing social order. And finally, I discuss one of Butterflies’ (a Delhi-based NGO which works with street and working children) programmes called “Bal Sabha” (children’s council), exploring opportunities for children to participate at various levels in order to gain confidence by analyzing their situation, articulating their problems, gaining an audience among the general public (Boyden, 1991) and challenging the society’s perception towards them.

It is not the aim of this paper to give definite solutions to such complex and interrelated issues, but rather to clarify the position of this topic within the development debate, and consequently introduce an instrument of analysis as well as a personal perspective on this issue, drawing upon a selection of available literature. It is important to stress at the outset, however, that a satisfactory discussion on the range of meaning and dynamics attached to ‘empowerment’ and ‘participation’ as such is beyond the scope of this paper. I however analyse the participation of ‘street children’ in “Bal Sabha” to discuss how they negotiate their identity in a particular context.
Chapter 2: Whom do we call ‘street children’? Intentions and Implications

2.1 Mismatch between Definition(s) and Reality

The existing literature (such as Aptekar, 1988; Ennew, 1994) has pointed out the conceptual ambiguity in the definition of ‘street children’. The frequent use of the term ‘street children’ has rendered it a generic meaning, encompassing all the children found on the streets either working or living. Other terms such as ‘children without families’, ‘high risk children’, ‘abandoned and destitute children’, ‘children in need of care and protection’ and ‘children in especially difficult circumstances’ are commonly used to refer to street children and tend to overlap (Agnelli, 1986 in Sondhi-Garg, 2004). The first definition, which was drawn up in the early 1980s by the Inter-NGO Programme for Street Children and Street youth, defines ‘street children’ as follows:

Street children are those for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word: i.e., unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc) more than the family has become their real home, a situation in which there is no protection, supervision or direction from responsible adults (Ennew, 1994, p14).

I argue that though they all spend a significant amount of time on the streets, they do not necessarily share a common life. The tendency to congregate all the children under the term ‘street children’ misses out the heterogeneity between them and overlooks the very different situation each child finds himself in.

However, in the late 1980s, UNICEF used two differentiating subcategories to divide the group into ‘children on the streets’ and ‘children of the streets’. Children ‘on’ the street refers to those who just use the street as their workplace but have regular contact with their families. Children ‘of’ the street live, work and sleep in the street (Ennew, 1996, Glauser, 1990). Thus, the prepositions ‘in’ and ‘of’ describe two types of relationships that children share with the street and with their families. In the
above classification, we can identify that ‘street’ is held opposite to ‘home’, and these are far from neutral terms. I further discuss this differentiation in the second chapter. The rigid classification ‘on’ or ‘of’ is problematic because it treats ‘street children’ as a static object, ignoring the transient nature of their work. Also, Aptekar and Heinomen (2003) point out that besides the natural transition from childhood to adolescence and adulthood, children’s involvement in street life and family contact varies.

As a result, there are many children who do not neatly fit into either category, ‘on’ or ‘of’. At this point I want to emphasize what Glauser (1990) observes in his research on ‘children of the street’ in Asunción, Paraguay, which will problematizes the above classification. First, there are children who, according to the definition, are not ‘children of the street’ but spend the night on the street for reasons of convenience related to their jobs. For example, some of the boys in Asunción, who shine shoes, prefer working at night to gain potential customers that are waiting for night buses and also face less competition as not many parents allow their children to work at night. Some of these children work all night while others get a few hours of sleep wherever they can. Some return home in the morning to get some sleep, while others only go home every two or three days, spending the other nights together with the children who do not go home on any regular basis at all (Glauser, 1990). Thus, categorizing those children who have family contact and return home to sleep as ‘children on the street’ ignores the reality that they share much of the life of ‘children of the street’.

Another problem arises when it is generally assumed that the street has become the permanent home for those children who lack family contact. They live, work and sleep in the street. Such an assumption does not take into consideration
that the street for these children is just one option out of many. They might spend days, weeks and sometimes even months at a time living within institutional homes or shelters, or with a relative, a neighbour, a godmother or a stranger they met in the street (Hecht, 1998, Glauser, 1990). This begs the question: What are the defining criteria? When these children have stayed off the street for half the year, will they still be considered as ‘children of the street’?

Also, the application of the terms in a decontextualised manner ignores that the definitions and circumstances may vary from one local community, country or continent to another and that they may be using different terms of reference. For example, in Indian cities, there are a number of migrants who make their home on the streets out of salvaged materials and engage in various temporary works. Children of these families are born and raised on the streets who engage in a variety of income generating activities such as scavenging, begging, selling items at traffic lights, washing windshields, shining shoes etc. Sharing much of the life of the ‘children of the street’, yet having family contact, makes it difficult to fix them in either category. The above examples illustrate the drawbacks in UNICEF’s definition of children ‘on’ and ‘of’ the street.

Recognizing these pitfalls, since the 1990s, UNICEF has been grouping all working children, whether working on city streets or elsewhere, as ‘working children’. It uses the term ‘street children’ to refer to the smaller number of largely abandoned children and youths for whom the city streets are home (Barker and Knaul 1991 in Aptekar and Heinonem, 2003). I argue that by referring to the children ‘on’ the street as abandoned, it ignores the child as a social actor, who may make the decision of abandoning the abusive home and not the other way around. Also, by suggesting ‘…for whom the city streets are home’, it ignores the fact that children do live in
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different settings and not only in the streets. Another attempt has been made to establish categories and identify them on the basis of the availability of shelter and also their level of contact with their families by UNICEF (1996), which classified three types of ‘street children’: Street-Family, Street-Working, and Street-Living (Sondhi-Garg 2004). In India, ‘street children’ have been categorized into three groups based on the relationships and contact with families: Children with their families, children who live with their family and work on the street, children who live and work on the street (Behura and Mohanty, 2002).

I have allowed this discussion on conceptual ambiguity in defining street children because definition(s) suggest how concepts are formulated and how society responds toward them. It is at the heart of every issue. For example Kilbourn (1997 cited in Protecting Street Children: Vigilants or The Rule of law?, 2006) defines ‘children of the street’ as those who do not have a ‘serious’ job, but who wander aimlessly around the streets, taking drugs and living from anti-social or illegal activities. Thus, the way ‘street children’ are defined reflects how they are perceived by society. At this point, it begs the question, who defines ‘street children’?

Glauser (1990, p144) suggests:

People do not form the concepts which they use but rather apply those currently hegemonic within their society. Those with social power can therefore define the reality of others by shaping and constraining the ways in which it is possible to talk and think about issues in society

The above definition by Kilbourn thus suggests what Kilbourn has felt or observed, his viewpoints, rather than what ‘street children’ think about themselves and their situations. Therefore, it can be argued that it is important to incorporate the perceptions of the children when an attempt is made to define ‘street-children’.
2.2 Questioning the Universal ‘Phenomenon of Street Children’

Within the universal image, children occupying urban spaces are often perceived as a ‘problem’ in need of a solution. Many scholars begin a discussion on the topic of ‘street children’ by referring to it as a ‘problem’.\(^1\) The approach, which problematizes ‘street children’, reducing them to ‘hapless victims’, fails to recognize the remarkable initiative, resiliency and ingenuity demonstrated by ‘street children’ in coping with difficult circumstances (Panter-Brick, 2000). Consequently, many studies (Lowry, 1997, Manihara, 1997, Pandey, 1991) look for the ‘causes’ behind the ‘street child’ phenomenon, and develop strategies based on universal ‘shared characteristics’, rather than looking at the unique circumstances within the individual environments that children are negotiating their lives in (McFadyen, 2004).

The existing literature on ‘street children’ establishes three hypotheses for the causes of street children. The first finds its core in economics. As recent migrants from rural areas in search of work, the children were unskilled and therefore unable to compete for scarce employment. They were forced to work at an early age or worse, were abandoned, because there was no money to raise them. The second hypotheses is concerned with internal family dynamics, which in this case was headed by a frustrated and aggressive male stepfather and a wife victimized by his abuse. The tension was eventually transferred to the children, who were forced out of the home. The third hypothesis posited that the children lived in delinquent neighborhoods where the culture or values were not conducive to productive lives (This paragraph draws heavily on Aptekar 1988,p.xx). Johan Le Rouz (1996, p430) argues, “It needs to be emphasized that street children represent a worldwide

\(^1\) For example, Behura and Mohanty (2003:01) say “Street children comprise a major problem in India from various viewpoints. It is a despicable problem not only in the developing countries but also in some of the developed countries”; also Manihara (1997) titles an article “Street Children: An International Problem”; also Savenstedt and Haggstrom (2005) writes “Children living on the street are a global and escalating problem, and girls are presented to be especially vulnerable”.
phenomenon despite cultural differences. Examination of the literature also indicates that the backgrounds of street children...are remarkably similar....findings presented in the present study...are common among street children internationally.”

The hypotheses of the ‘Phenomenon of Street children’ provide a broad idea about some of the commonalities ‘street children’ face, homogenizing ‘street children’ and ignoring the unique circumstances of each child. For example, the hypotheses fail to take into account why children from all the poor or broken families do not come out to live on the street. Thus each child has to be understood in the context of particular geographies, cultures, political economies, family circumstances and cultural perceptions of childhood (McFadyen, 2004).

Consequently, development agencies have established a separate category of ‘street children’, employing “separated dedicated programmes” (White 2002: 1096 in ibid, 2004), thus isolating the children from their previous contexts. As a result, one is lead to believe that a child living on the streets of India has less in common with their rural counterparts, and more in common with children living on the streets of Brazil, Uganda or Thailand (McFadyen 2004, p18). Accordingly, such categorizations of children who decontextualised them, mislead the interventions; which try to develop opportunities to improve the circumstances the street children are dealing with.
Chapter 3: Placing street children within the competing conceptions of Childhood

The image of a child as ‘innocent, weak and in need of protection’ finds its origin in the dominant notion of childhood. This dominant notion of childhood, which rests on the idea of vulnerability and incompetence (Boyden, 1991), is central to the debates in which street-living and street-working children are entangled. Street-living children, who live on their own and engage in various economic activities to support themselves, seem to make a departure from the paradigm of ‘proper’ childhood, which demands that children should be reared by parents within a secure domestic setting and secluded from the dangers of the adult world (Boyden, 1991). Implicit is the idea of a defined boundary of home, school and playground where children play, study and live in the comfort of a secured home and not engaging in economic labour. Since street-living children do not fit into the idea of ‘proper’ childhood, they are viewed as ‘abnormal’ or ‘lacking childhood’ (Panter-Brick, 2000). In India, they are referred to as rag-pickers, which is a description of what they do, not who they are. The media’s portrayal of street-living and street-working children as destitute, together with the images of abused children and famine-stricken children, solidifies adult notions of childhood as inherently a weak, helpless and dependent status (Patricia Holland cited in Hecht, 1998). Such a construction of childhood which emphasizes vulnerability and incompetence of children and celebrates one particular view of a ‘proper’ childhood, has led to interventions that undermine children’s resilience and malign their coping efforts; is crucial for the purpose of my research which aims to explore the resilient nature of street-living children in Delhi. This begs a discussion of whether this dominant version of childhood is natural and universal.
The modern view of a ‘proper’ childhood is constructed on the notion that a child should have a ‘carefree, safe, secure and happy’ existence and be raised by ‘caring and responsible’ adults. Only in such a context can a child develop to its full potential, specified in terms of outcomes in adulthood such as educational achievements, economic security, healthy attachments and lack of antisocial habits (Panter-Brick, 2000). Aries (1962 in Jenks, 1996) in his famous thesis argues that the modern conception of childhood has not always existed in the fashion we know today. Aries (1962 in James and Prout, 1990) claims that medieval Europe did not possess a concept of childhood as divorced from adulthood and children were considered as just ‘people’ whose needs and responsibilities were not different than those of adults. Gradual isolation of children from adult world emerged with the growth of new attitudes of ‘coddling’ towards children that stressed the specific needs of long periods of formal education before they assumed adult responsibilities. Other scholars too pointed out the evolutionary nature of the growth of the Western conception of childhood. Boyden (1994 in Panter-Brick, 2000) suggests that the modern conception of childhood has gained its prominence during the advanced industrial age in Europe and North America. In this period children were being withdrawn from labour market and streets and were confined to the home and the school. Following this, Hecht (1998) and Levine and White (1996 cited in Panter-Brick, 2000) linked it to the emergence of an increasingly urbanized market-based world coupled with the international pressure to reduce or eliminate child labour, that confined children to the privileged domain of school, home, and commercially ambitious play places, from amusement parks to shopping malls. Thus, over the course of the development of capitalism in Western Europe, children have become relatively economically worthless to their parents; however have become emotionally
and psychologically priceless (Viviana Zelizer, 1985 in Hecht, 1998, also Ansell, 2005).

The approach, which views childhood as not fixed but open to different interpretations (Jenks, 1996), argues for a paradigmatic shift towards understanding childhood as a social construction and a component of social analysis (Aries in Archard, 2004). Nandy (1992 in Hecht, 1998, p70) argues, “there is nothing or inevitable about childhood. Childhood is culturally defined and created; it, too, is a matter of human choice”.

The hegemonic version of childhood is thus challenged, and variables such as class, gender or ethnicity come into interplay, thus revealing a variety of childhoods rather than a single and universal phenomenon (Prout and James, 1990). This pragmatic shift necessitates thinking about children as social actors who are active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live (Boyden, Prout and James, 1990). This is the framework within which I will study ‘street children’ in Delhi who, even during times of great adversity, consciously act upon and influence the environments in which they live.

I argue that the idea of childhood as marked by biological immaturity, a dependent stage which is in need of care and protection, is not only Western in its nature. Similar characteristics are found in Traditional Indian thought, known as ‘Ayurveda’\(^1\), which holds that a child passes through five stages\(^2\) of childhood. By passing through these stages, the child gradually moves away from the mother-infant symbiosis into a full-fledged member of the society (Kakar, 1981 in McFadyen 2004).

\(^3\) five stages of childhood: Garbha (foetal periods), Ksheerda (0-6 months) or when the infant lives entirely on the mother’s milk, Ksheeranannada (6 months to 2 years) early childhood when weaning takes place, Bala (2-5 years) and Kumara (5-16 years) (Kakar 1981 in McFadyen 2004).
McFadyen, 2004). However, unlike Western societies where parents bear the responsibility to teach their children social skills in order to help them conform to social norms, Indian ideology holds that children will naturally develop social skills on their own (Kakar, 1981 in McFadyen, 2004). I strongly disagree with Kakar’s argument, that opposed to Western society; Indian society puts the responsibility on the child itself to develop its social skills. Instead I argue that such an interpretation of childhood is only limited to poor families. For example, children from poor families in India cannot afford to remain in the comfort of their home and are expected to develop their skills and equally assume the responsibilities of the household. However, middle class and upper class families in India hold the conception of childhood similar to Western societies; i.e., a conception of childhood as an immature, incompetent and vulnerable phase that one goes through, which requires special protection and exclusion from any sort of hardships. My argument finds support in the concept of ‘nurtured’ and ‘nurturing’ childhood constructed by Hecht (1998). Tobias Hecht in his study of ‘Street children’ in Recife, Northeast Brazil, identifies two contrasting contexts: nurturing childhood and nurtured childhood. ‘Nurturing children’, falling outside the modern definition of children, are poor children who from an early age are expected to take on serious responsibilities and bring in resources to nurture the household. ‘Nurtured children’, resembling the modern definition of children, are a coddled progeny of middle-class families that are highly differentiated from and dependent on adults. Nurtured children are the economic liabilities to the household (Hecht 1998). A similar hypothesis can be drawn in the Indian context also, where children from poor households and rural households are expected to help their parents in making ends meet. In this context, I am inclined to analyse where street-living children fall within these competing contexts of
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childhood. This takes us to the following section where I locate street-living children in the Indian context.
Chapter 4: The Indian Context

4.1 Locating ‘street children’ in Indian Context

In order to understand the dynamics of the lives of ‘street children’, it is crucial to have an understanding of the contexts in which they find themselves. In India, the experience of childhood is deeply embedded in the larger social matrix of the community, caste, tribe, kin-group and family (Raman, 2000); a child should be understood in this context and not in isolation. While most ‘street children’ around the world face discrimination from society, street children in India are embedded in a particular hierarchical social order, where their place of origin and economic situation have no bearing on their social worlds which are organized by age and gender, economic class and educational levels, and by caste and religious difference. Relations of superiority and inferiority across positions of gender, age, caste and class tend to be strongly marked in everyday language and behaviour (McFadyen, 2004). Thomas Poffenberger (1995, p328) remarks:

> Every society has its own norms for acceptable child-rearing practices, norms that grow out of the society’s requirements, norms that grow out of the society’s requirements for adult behaviour and prepare children to adopt the behaviour.

In India, parents believe that a particular form of harsh treatment will best prepare the child to function in a group-oriented society, and is therefore generally considered to be in the best interest of the child (Poffenberger 1995).

The impact of the macro-structures and processes operating at the wider societal level affects groups differentially, determining life-choices of groups and individuals (Raman 2000). With the effects of ongoing structural adjustment programmes and increasing rural to urban migration, there is an increasing number of families living in poverty in our urban settings (Behura and Mohanty, 2005). Rapid urbanization has
brought with it rapid growth in urban slums. In 1996 an estimated 100 million people were said to be living in urban slums in India (UNICEF, 1998). Of the 37 million children who are living in urban poverty, a substantial proportion of them are living in informal (illegal) settlements or other temporary situations, which include living along railway lines, nullahs (drainage canals) and on the streets themselves (O’Kane). In such situations, children are asked to go out and find a job. Afroz (13 years) says:

If a child sits at home then parents think of him as a burden because he is eating and not earning. Therefore, the child is sent out either to work or to beg...the parent may say ‘you won’t get any food this evening, unless you go and earn some money for yourself.’ My parents would not allow me to study—they wanted me to work (quoted in O’kane 2003).

McFadyen (2004) in her research with ‘street children’ in Delhi learns that parents sometimes fix a particular amount that the child has to bring back home. If the child does not meet the requirement, he/she is exploited, thus, falling under the realm of ‘Nurturing Children’ (Hecht 1998). However, street living children who do not live with their family, spending whatever they earn on themselves, threatens the conception of ‘nurturing’ as well as ‘nurtured’ childhood.

Raman (2000) argues that the plurality of Indian childhoods and their embeddedness in a variety of wider structures do not leave any scope for the child’s rights and an endeavour would have to address the diversity of structures and relationships. It is in this context, I will analyse how ‘street children’ are placed and challenge the existing norms and order of the Indian society.

4.2 Street-living children: challenging the existing social order

This section explores how street-living children are positioned in relationship to the wider society. I argue that the perception held by society of street-living children as ‘deviant’ and ‘unruly’ is in part due to the fact that ‘street children’ upset the authoritarian character of Indian society. When suggesting that child is neither
‘natural’ nor ‘normal’ as it has been established, rather is always moral and political, Jenks (1996, p77) remarks:

Power is organized through the combination of strategies...Modern power does not exercise itself with the omnipotent symbolism of the scaffold, rather it operates through scopic regimes, through observation that is organized hierarchically, through judgments rendered normative within social structures and through careful scrutiny. [My emphasis]

Thus in the exercise of power, adults and children alike are rendered as objects, who in turn have become instrumental in the exercise of the power (Jenks, 1996) and thus destined to maintain the social order, which is endorsed, as ‘neutral’.

Drawing on Foucault’s concept of ‘governmentality’ (Foucault, 1991), the idea of childhood is embedded within a wider process of new techniques of social control and governance. As argued by Rose (in Jenks, 1996), the modern child has become the focus of innumerable projects that aimed to safeguard it from physical, sexual and moral danger in order to instill the attributes of ‘normal’ development, promoting intelligence, educability and emotional stability.

In the context of India, which is a class-dominant,\(^4\) patriarchal society (McFadyen, 2004), demands a child to remain confined to the prescribed realm of the assumption is that children’s needs are best served within the context of the family, which is thought to automatically offer greater stability, support and protection for children than they can themselves provide through their own energy and initiative (Boyden, 1993). Implicit is the notion that ‘street’ is antithetical to ‘home’ and ‘family’. The construction of ‘family’ and ‘street’ as opposite to each other tend to presuppose that the children participate in only one (Panter-Brick, 2000). As opposed to the

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\(^4\) India’s economic growth has not significantly served to alleviate poverty in rural village that depend on agricultural (Perkovitch 2003), pushing high-caste people into poverty (Pande 1991), diving contemporary Indian society more along economic lines than on caste, making it a class-dominated society.
known members of the family, the street is obscure with anonymous citizens who are perceived as dangerous (Aptekar, 1988). Thus street-living children in Delhi, who by choice or by force have come out of the realm of their family, living by their wit, managing their lives by themselves, hurt the notion of the authoritarian concept of family structure from the patriarchal point of view. Additionally, The Juvenile Justice (Care & Protection of Children) Act 2000 provides for care of destitute neglected children by state-run homes and NGO homes certified as Fit-Person institutions (Khanna, 2001). In such a context, street living children seem to threaten the law which requires them to be under the protection of adults or family. Without the slightest doubt, family, or in certain cases extended family, is deemed to be the best place for the child to develop. The hierarchy of age plays a crucial role in an Indian family where children are controlled by their elders. Gloria (1983 in Aptekar, 1988) remarks that children need schedules and discipline and parents are responsible to heed this advice to their children, or else their children will be lost to the streets. The underlying

It is observed that from the outset, attempts have been made to mould ‘street-children’. Mid-nineteenth century reformers in Britain (such as Mary Carpenter, 1853, Micaiah Hill, 1853, Henry Worsley, 1849) recognized the main problem posed by such children as the mismatch between the age of the children and the experience they gain by being on their own (Hendrick, 1990). This approach towards ‘street children’ is reflected in M.D.Hill’s (1855 cited in Hendrick 1990, p43) remarks:

---he [street child] knows much and a great deal too much of what is called life—he can take care of his own immediate interests. He is self-reliant, he has so long directed or mis-directed his own actions and has so little trust in those about him, that \textit{he submits to no control and asks for no protection}. He has consequently much to unlearn- he has to be turned again into a child [my emphasis]
I also want to call to attention that India is a gendered society, though with few regional variations (McFadyen, 2004), where the division of labour by gender is such that domestic sphere is considered to be the proper place for women and girls, whereas the public sphere corresponds more with the male world. The street, as part of the public sphere, is generally not considered to be the right place for women and for teenage girls. As a consequence, it is commonly believed that adolescent girls in particular should not be living or working on the streets; the (seemingly) unaccompanied girls who are in the street are thus seen as prostitutes rather than as workers (Beers, 1996). On the other hand, the street girls who have altered the interpersonal relationships between men and women in the existing Indian patrifocal family system are being portrayed as sexual deviants. Whereas the fear of errant street-living boys—playing aggressively on the streets, being dirty, wearing ragged clothes, experimenting with drugs, or sneaking into movie theaters, all socially irresponsible action for boys was related to their possible menace to the perceived safety of property, person and the civic order. This further ruins them for future roles as reliable workers. The same actions for girls were signs that they were spoiling their purity, making them undesirable as women and mothers (Aptekar, 1988).

Thus, according to the state and the dominant society, street-living children are seen to be committing a social violation, as their presence on the streets and their life-style contradicts state ideological discourse of family values and the ideas of public order (Beazley, 2003). The abilities and successes projected by street-living children threaten people with the fear that their own children might wish to replicate the street children and want to live outside the prescribed notions of childhood (Aptekar, 1988), thereby endangering the family discipline. Consequently, for those

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5 Garo, a matrilineal tribe in Meghalaya in North-east India, privilege birth of girl child over that of boy child (Raman 2000)
people whose families formed the reference point for their own identities, and had pursued success through the established institutions of school, clubs and churches; the street children were seen as possible threats to their personal identity as family members and also to the institutions (Aptekar, 1988). Moreover, these children seem to do things which the law had forbidden, such as vending without a license, blocking parts of the pavement, obstructing traffic, harassing passersby by begging illegally, roaming in the streets violating anti-vagrancy laws, violating anti-drugs legislation, etc. Thus for the larger proportion of society, including policy makers and implementers, street children ‘disrupt the tranquility, stability and normality of society’ (Glauser, 1990 in Beers, 1996).

This insecurity on the part of the society has resulted in acts that justify the ‘cleaning up’ of children from the streets such as arrests, imprisonments and in some extreme cases, torture and extermination (Beazley, 2003, Green, 2003 ), seeking to redress the aberrations manifested by street children against the dominant conception of childhood. In India, the Juvenile Justice Act (1986), later the Juvenile Justice Act (2000), were enacted to protect children’s rights and prohibits the detention of juveniles in police stations or jails for periods longer than twenty-four hours (HRW 1995). However, a study conducted by the Indian Ministry of Labour and UNICEF in Bombay (1992) informs that the most common complaint of street-living children was that they were rounded up and locked up by police for two or three days merely on suspicion. Another study conducted in Delhi observes that the one of the major problems faced by street children is that they are often nabbed by police for crimes they have not committed. For example, a lady passenger’s necklace was stolen for which all the boys at the station were rounded up and put in the lock-up for two weeks. They are mercilessly thrashed and sometimes put up in
lock-ups under charges of vagrancy, gambling or street brawls and are sent to remand homes (HRW, 1995).

Drawing on the accounts of street-living children in Delhi for leaving home, it can be argued that they have been subjected to the most extreme and ugly side of relations of hierarchy, obedience, age-based status, and so forth that are prevalent in families and in workplaces in India. Their rejection of the rules is a rebellion against the whole existing social system in India (McFadyen, 2004).
Chapter 5: Being on the streets

The process by which children develop into street children is characterized by a degree of rationality which is not obvious if the observer begins with the end point, the child in the street (Veale 1992, p119).

The social policy and public action tend to provoke pity and an impulse to rescue street children by citing them as hapless victims, emphasizing police killings and death squads (Ennew, 1994). I argue that such attempts escape the realities and generate stigmatization of the children. Tobias Hecht (1998) argues that one has to know the children, understand them and their families to be able to understand the torturous decisions and circumstances that lead children to come to the streets. However, Ennew (1994) points out, some people claim that there is no time for new research and the most important thing is to act for disadvantaged children immediately. This results into interventions that fail because the of lack of first hand research documenting the lives of the children concerned. Recognizing the limit of my research, as it is not accompanied by fieldwork, I use the case studies by various researchers to pull together the experience of street-living children in Delhi.

The street-living children in Delhi demonstrate that they have a zest to seek out a better life for themselves. They are survivors, but what motives them to endure is their desire for pleasure and to feel good about themselves (McFadyen, 2004).

Rahul (10 years): My uncle had one truck, 2 DCM’s Wholesale Vegetable and Fruit Market. Every morning he woke me up and I had to work from 4 in the morning. So one day I got on the Kalka train, which comes from Shimla, and I came here. My uncle came to Delhi to find me, but I ran away again (interviewed by McFadyen, 2004,p82) (Example-1)

Amir (10 years): I used to earn money for my mother by selling incense sticks. One day I lost the money through a hole in my pocket. My mother scolds and hits me all the time. I feared that when she found out I had lost the money, she would beat me badly, so I got on a train (interviewed by McFadyen, 2004,p-83)
The above two examples show that the children were being subjected to harsh treatment by their family members. While abandoning such circumstances, with a search for liberty, freedom and pleasure (Aptekar 1988), children opt to come out of their home. While indicating that the child comes out of the home, doesn’t mean he intends to come to the street. As discussed earlier, street is one of the spheres of his place of abode and not the sole one.

Felsman (1984 in Baker and Panter-Brick, 2000) argues that the departure from home is seldom sudden but it consists a series of steps in which the children find out more about the urban environment, investigate work opportunities and make contact with children who are always living on the street.

When the above suggestion could be true in certain cases, Rahul and Amir’s explanation of the reason of leaving home do not support the same. However, for children who live in the slums of Delhi, Felsman’s hypothesis could pass, since they live in the urban environment and come into contact with other street-living children.

Drawing on the interviews taken by McFadyen (2004, p96-98), I argue that ‘street children’ take a range of initiatives and have the ability to adapt to new environments. This argument dispute the hypothesis of rescue-oriented agencies that ‘street children’ are vulnerable and incompetent.

They weigh the positive features of autonomy against the negative aspects of their home lives (Taylor and Veal, 1996 in McFadyen, 2004) and make a number of decisions which are paramount to their survival on the street. McFadyen (2004) learns from the research with street-living children in Delhi that the most prized possession is their freedom to be their own boss, to make their own choices, and to come and go at will. This can be observed in the two examples I cited. McFadyen (2004) suggests that the longer the children live away from home, fear of punishment
at the hands of their parents and their reluctance to relinquish the newly acquired freedom prevent them from returning to home. Instead of the notion that these children are leading an aimless life, McFadyen’s (2004) research illustrates that the children are constantly trying to have a better and a just life, where they are not abused and cheated.

Saleem (11) says, “Everybody thinks all boys are the same, they steal” (interviewed in McFadyen, 2004). The public image of street-living children as thieves makes it even more difficult for them to find permanent work. So, street-living children in Delhi often indulge in those means of subsistence which allow them to be their own boss such as booming in the trains, begging, rag-picking, garbage collecting, checking in the train for left-over food and plastic bottle, or sometimes working in tea stalls, as assistants in shops, or in many hotels as kitchen helpers or cleaners (ARC, Butterflies 2003, McFadyen, 2004).

The street-living children try a number of jobs before they settle on one particular one, and the job they choose to take up is influenced by their family life, culture, geography, economic circumstances and other experiences (Aptekar, 1988). For example, some street-living children do not take the job of shoe-shining, or selling peanuts, popcorn, paan, newspaper and these jobs are done by mainly street-working children who go back to home on a regular basis. Street-living children do not indulge in such jobs because these jobs demands long hours and also they run a risk of being looted by older boys. When explaining the survival strategies the children adopt, Gopal, a 12-year-old boy says that children want to save money, or there is too much trash to take to the recycling all at once, they find a

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6 From the interview(s) by McFadyen, 2004
7 Interviewed by McFadyen, 2004, p 110
place to store the goods. Saleem adds that it is not good to carry more money at hand since the children run a risk of being looted by older boys. Thus hiding the trash helps them from carrying a lot of money at one time and works as a future saving. Though rag picking is the most common work for street-living children in Delhi (Kaur, 1997), there are some who do not like collecting garbage; they work for others to carry the trash to the recycling. They often come into contact with adult vendors, with whom they later develop a certain trust and bonding, keeping money with them and taking it as and when required.

Panicker (2000) adds that “Street-living children always work for long hours, and are often involved in ‘honest’ work”. Not disputing the latter part, the suggestion that street-living children work for long hours is problematic. McFadyen in her study found that street-living children unlike street-working children work for few hours. Saleem (aged 12-13) says: “No, they work for a few hours in the morning, take a rest, go to the movies, play some video game, or go swimming in the river or the park, and then come back in the evening and work for few more hours. They don’t work more than six or seven hours in a day” (interviewed in McFadyen, 2004). The money earned from the day’s activities is spent on movies, games, sweets, cigarettes, paan and solution. One of the children’s favorite activities is to go to the Bollywood movies, which has lots of colourful costumes, beautiful scenery, and a lot of singing and dancing (McFadyen, 2004). This demonstrates that rather than ‘working to survive’, street living children are ‘working to enjoy’- a phrase borrowed from McFadyen (2004). Thus extending the argument of Hecht (1998), I argue that street-living children in India do not miss ‘childhood’ but experience a different type of childhood.

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8 Interviewed by McFadyen, 2004, p 110
9 told to McFadyen, 2004
This is not to imply that street-living children do not face adversity. However, I am interested to learn how they cope with the difficult circumstances they face. Street-living children also struggle over getting a safe place to sleep at night. Sleeping in open spaces not only exposes them to harsh weather but also makes them prone to sexual assaults by pedophiles. No place is safe for them. Most boys are involved in both homosexual and heterosexual behaviour irrespective of their preferences, completely depending on availability (Panicker, 2003). McFadyen (2004) learns from her informal conversation with the children that the older ones often sexually abuse younger boys. So the children seek out places to sleep where older boys or police cannot disturb them. Gopal (a street-living child) pointing to a long corrugated roof stretching the length of platform five in New Delhi Railway station, says “Didi”, here is where I sleep. No Police or big boys can get us here” (McFadyen, 2004). The children complain that police unnecessarily harass them, loot them and are reported to sexually abuse them (Ibid 2004). The police abuse of street-living children is symbiotic of the perception that street children are criminals. However Gopal exemplifies how street-living children construct different coping strategies in the face of diversity.

Another highlighted issue is regarding the drug abuse by street-living children in Delhi. Most of the street-living children in Delhi take drugs (Panicker, 2000). Most of them are multi-drug users. A study conducted on the “Phenomenon of Substance Abuse and sexually transmitted diseases among street children” by Butterflies (Delhi based NGO cited in Panicker, 2000) reports that 75 per cent of the children interviewed consumed alcohol on a regular basis, about 25 per cent daily.

10 ‘Elder sister’-a way of addressing elder women in Hindi speaking regions in India.
11 The common drugs are tobacco, crude alcohol, “brown sugar”, cannabis, gasoline, glue, paint thinner and kerosene (sniffing). Sedatives and codeine-based cough syrups are also popular. Boys are more likely to be regular smokers whereas chewable tobacco is quite popular among girls (Panicker 2000)
Undistilled crude alcohol is easily available at several places and children do not have any problem buying it despite their young age. It is available in polythene packets costing Rs 10 to Rs 15. The local name for it is “thailee”\textsuperscript{12}.

In the literature about ‘street children’, the use of drugs is also explained as an attempt to ward off hunger, cold and distress. For example, the caption to a photograph in an article published in World Health reads, “Glue sniffing in Colombia: A negative and destructive way of forgetting the pangs of hunger” (Rialp 1991 in Hecht 1998, p62). Panicker (2000, p303) also argues that street-living children often take drugs to forget the pain, trauma and humiliation of being sexually abused. I argue such an approach ignores the possibility of initiative on the part of street children, who are portrayed as ‘hapless victims’, rather than as people making a choice, albeit a choice with life-threatening consequences (Hecht, p1999). Hecht (1998) finds out in a radio workshop with street-living children in Recife that sniffing glue diminishes hunger but children do not sniff glue in empty stomach. They sniff it after eating. Similarly, McFadyen (2004) finds that in spite of the perceived health risks, the street-living children in Delhi speak of using intoxicants as a recreational activity. Thus when literature on ‘street-children’ and media portrays that street-living children use drugs in order to escape from hunger, cold and trauma, they reinforce the construction of street-living children in terms of ‘victimization’ by denying that they are social actors who are making choices for themselves.

Another common perception put forth by government agencies and advocacy groups is that street-living children are most at risk when it comes to health issues since they do not have anyone to look after them (McFadyen, 2004). Such an assessment is questionable since it compares street-living children with Western

\textsuperscript{12} Term for packet in Hindi
middle-class children instead of comparing them with their local home-based counterparts from the same economic class (Panter-Brick, 2002 in McFadyen, 2004). A study conducted on the ‘Nutritional Status of Street and Working Children in National Capital Territory of Delhi’ by Butterflies Health Programme (2004) reports that street-living children are better nourished than street-working children. This is because street-living children are not accountable for anything, have control over their earnings, spend most of their earnings on food unlike street-working children who give their earnings to their parents when they go back to home who in turn have many more mouths to feed in the family. Also street-living children are adept at earning many sources for free food. They get food from local vendors, institutions and restaurants.

However, it has been reported by various studies (such as Panicker, 2000, McFadyen, 2004, Khanna, 2001) that street-living children do not get fair treatment in public hospitals because of their unkempt, dirty appearance. The negative image of drug users discourages health workers and street educators from developing special skills to deal the issue (Panicker, 2000). This is viewed as something to be dealt with by law enforcement authorities and the police (Panicker, 2000), leaving even lesser options for the children. This would restrict many of them from going to consult doctors in public hospitals.

As opposed to the idea that a street-living child is alone and unprotected, street-living children form social organisations. Working and living collectively is the main support strategies for street-living children in Delhi. However, the groups are loosely linked, each child is free to make decisions for himself and come and go as they like (McFadyen, 2004). For most children, their friendship appears to be based on mutual respect, shared interests, experience and trust. As told to McFadyen
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(2004), if a child is new to a particular area, infringes on the earning capacity of other children, is not willing to share or work collectively, can not be trusted, then he will not be accepted by other children. But with time when the child becomes friendly and gets along with other children, he will be included in the group to earn, play and stay together. The public, however, perceive such a group as a ‘gang’ (McFadyen, 2004), totally ignoring the fact that street-living children are social in nature and after all, are children. They also play, eat, enjoy just like other children who stay at home.

An additional aspect to the children’s coping strategies is the presence of NGOs in Delhi, which offer free education, free meals, clothing, medical assistance, shelter. The caseworkers in NGOs function as surrogate parents when offering the children advice on what to do with their lives, facilitating training programmes and affording them with some sort of protection from police who would leave the children alone if they knew they were associated with an NGO (McFadyen 2004, Butterflies). However, similar to what Hecht (1998) observes in Recife, street-living children in Delhi view NGOs as an integral part of the street life and not as a way out. Street-living children are adept at incorporating the services of the NGOs into their survival strategies but the extent to which each child will utilize these services depends upon their circumstances and their needs (McFadyen 2004).

Raisham (a street-living child in Delhi) says, “no matter what the NGO offered, it was important to remember that every child was different and had different needs. No matter what approach the NGO uses to deal with children’s issues, in the end it is the child who ultimately decides whether to use these services and for how long” (interviewed in McFadyen 2004).
For example, if a child were very ill, he might weigh and choose the benefits of receiving health care over his personal freedom. Also, some NGOs offered the children a reprieve from the day-to-day struggles of their lives. They came to draw pictures, to watch movies and to interact with other children. Some came for the educational opportunities because the contact points offered non-formal education and opportunities for children to learn different trades. However most children just came for a few days at a time when they wanted clean clothes, food, medical treatment or entertainment (McFadyen, 2004). This leads one to question that while NGOs provide so much, why children would not chose to stay in them.

Sanjay (aged 12) says that even though he enjoyed staying at the center, his desire to live by his own means, be with his friends and make his own decisions was stronger (interviewed in McFadyen, 2004).

Children resented NGOs because there is generally a fear amongst the children that if they entered a shelter, they will be abused or sent home. While NGOs offer a positive alternative to street life, there will always be children who will choose an autonomous lifestyle over one governed by schedules and rules (McFadyen, 2004). This demonstrates that street-living children are not passive recipients; rather they are making their own decisions by weighing the benefits they could accrue from different sources. This also begs to recognize that all street-living children are not the same and they have different needs. Thus interventions must be led by the participation of street-living children. For example, what kind of services do they want the most, and whether they want to go back home or not, or simply what kind of rules and regulations are suited to them. They cannot be cut from their environment and put in a shelter.
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The unique survival strategies employed in securing food, finding a safe place to sleep, way of saving money, group formation, using institutions etc show that children are not defenseless victims. Also the idea of ‘working to enjoy’ is a survival strategy in itself (McFadyen, 2004). Therefore instead of viewing street children as existing outside of childhood or representing an abnormal form of it, we need to pay attention to the unique strategies they employ in managing their lives (Hecht, 1998), negotiating their identity in order to change society’s perception towards them.
Chapter 6: Negotiating Identity: Challenging society’s perception

The previous discussion calls into notice that one of the key problems identified by children is the way society views them and treats them. The society perceives them either in terms of ‘victimization’ or ‘delinquency’. This results into stigmatization of the children (Lucchini 1993), reinforcing their marginality. Amir, a street living child points out that livelihoods such as begging, sweeping or selling items on trains bring these children into constant contact with adults, many of whom do not treat street children well. Almost daily the children who engage in these types of survival strategies endure the scourge and admonishment from a society that perceives them as nothing but disobedient and deviant (McFadyen, 2004). The persistence of the image of ‘street children’ as delinquents is in part due to the dissonance that arise between, on the one hand, a perception emerging from research (e.g. Barker and Knaul, 1997) that contends that the child has made a rational decision by leaving a deprived and exploited home and, on the other hand, a general commitment to the notion that the family unit is the basis of society (Veale, Taylor and Linehan, 2000). Adopting the view that children have chosen to leave their home calls into question the role of family and the life of children within the home. This is threatening because the family is held to be the proper place for the child, which represents security and safety (Ibid, 2000). Therefore, I argue that the unchallenged notions about social orders are responsible for the society’s false assumptions about ‘street children’. This has led me to discuss one of Butterflies’ programmes called “Bal Sabha” (Children’s Council) to understand how children can participate at various levels in order to gain confidence by analyzing their situation,

13 Butterflies is a grassroots non-government organisation working with street and working children in Delhi
articulating their problems, gaining an audience among the general publics (Boyden, 1991), changing the society’s perception towards them. Though street-living children live on their own, their life is influenced by a wide range of adults (O’Kane, 2003) and also by experiencing harassment and contempt from passersby and the police, as something, which is inherent to their existence on the streets.

As Lewis Aptekar (1988) rightly argues, society’s reaction to street children does not take place in a vacuum but includes the children’s responses to adults. It begs the discussion how street-living children can influence the adults’ opinion about them. I argue that within the ‘rights-oriented’ or ‘empowerment’ approach, when programmes aim to empower street children with the skills and knowledge to prepare them for the productive markets and live a respected life, their success would be jeopardized if society’s perception towards street children does not change. This is because ‘street-living children’ is not an isolated category; rather, it is a part of a social structure. There can be several meanings of empowerment but I am interested to analyse how street-living children can be empowered to negotiate their identity in relation to the society. I would take the definition of empowerment as a process by which street-living children gain control over their environment [unlike the rescue-oriented approach which takes the children off the environment (street)] and become involved in defining, and deciding on issues affecting them (Edwards and Hulme, 1992 in Pattisson, undated). Thus participation and empowerment are inseparable, where participation can be thought of as the road to empowerment (Save the Children 1997 in Ibid). The impact of prevailing negative perceptions of street children and their desire to be treated with dignity and respect that they deserve has been frequently vocalized by children during their Bal Sabha, Bal Mazdoor ki Awaz meetings and in other collective and participatory action initiatives (O’Kane, 2003).
Why does every person hate us and trouble us? Are we children not part of the society, don’t we have two hands, two feet, two eyes. After all what do they find so bad in us? Due to work we look dirty, we do not have a house, we do not have bedding and no one to take care of us- this is the reason, isn’t it? (Bal Mazdoor Ki Awaz, 2000 in O’Kane, 2003).

In India, where the authoritarian concept of family structure is dominant, street-living children in Delhi who are out of the realm of their family, living by their wit and managing their lives by themselves, seem to be committing a social violation.

We want people to leave us alone so that we can live our lives peacefully. We want them to stop labeling us as thieves, pickpockets and beggars…We should be treated with respect. Even we are human beings, we are not animals (Suraj, age 12 in O’Kane 2003 [my emphasis])

Similar views were expressed by street-living children in the study conducted by Save the Children UK, Nepal. Being labeled as ‘Khate’ affects children in their day-to-day lives and is one of the greatest determinants of their future. It affects their self-esteem, their ability to access services and their ability to find good employment (Southon and Dhakal, 2000).

To change the people’s perceptions of street children, it is necessary to transform these children’s personal troubles into public issues (Mills, 1959 in O’Kane). In poor families in India, where the child is expected to bring in resources to the household (Das, 1994), efforts at preventing children from working in the street threaten the position of children within the home. Thus any “solution” to the plight of children must consider first how to make the lives of “home children” more rewarding (Hecht, 1998).

If a child sits at home then parents think of him as a burden because he is eating and not earning. Therefore, the child is sent out either to work or to beg…The parent may say ‘you won’t get any food this evening, unless you go and earn some money for yourself.’ My parents would not allow me to study-they wanted me to work (Afroz. 13 years in O’kane, 2003)
“We do not have any money at home. Papa is very old. My younger brother and sister have their expenses as well, so I pick rags. I do not know where the Government school is. It is not one in our community. Even if there is a school where will the money come to look after my brother and sister?” (Hameeda, girl, age 10 in O’kane, 2003).

Emphasizing the need to look into the deeper structural causes, Ansell argues:

The third world people in general are disenfranchised through the influence of policies of IFIs (International Financial Institutes) and as long as such structural conditions persist which prevent children’s lives from being ameliorated, the right of young people to express a view is arguably irrevalent (2005, p246).

While agreeing with Ansell that deeper structural solutions are necessary to liberate children’s lives, I will argue that though participation may have a lesser impact without structural changes, this is not to say that participation would not make any difference. I put forth the argument that structural alterations will be achieved through the participation of children and adults alike. The participation of subjects is a necessary means for political change and also a goal in itself (Reddy and Ratna, 2002)

Drawing on the following quotes, society’s perceptions of street-living and street-working children in Delhi are reflected.

Some of the men in shops say ‘come in girl and collect this rubbish’. Then when we go in they will shut the door behind us and try to abuse us (girl, age 12 in O’Kane, 2003)

If other NGOs try to lure us by giving free food and clothes they hurt our self-respect, as they consider us beggars (children, Bal Sabha meeting in O’Kane, 2003).

Thus, I argue, when it is necessary to teach them skills, make them aware of their rights, other relevant information and knowledge, for all this to work for them, they have to be empowered in relation to the society. This would require having a clear understanding of power-relations existing in our society. This would bring in different perspectives of childhood held by various stakeholders in their lives (e.g. parents,
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police, employers, community members, NGO workers, the judiciary, government agencies and international agencies) (O’Kane, 2003).

In the case of children’s participation, while institutional processes and power structures are needed to be assessed critically, there is a greater need to analyse and challenge the fundamental power-relationships between adults and children (Holland, with Blackburn 1998 in Johnson and Scott, 1998).

Through Bal Majdoor Ki Awaz, street living and working children who engage in dialogue with broader public show that they are resourceful human beings who can articulate their problems and reflect upon their experience. The dialogue and encouragement of ‘critical enquiry’ by children helps them to understand power relations, to challenge negative perceptions held against them and to assert their rights as children and as human beings (O’Kane, 2003). The effort of children in Bal Sabha in changing people’s ideas about them can be understood by borrowing Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. Gramsci (1971 cited in Mittelman and Chin 2005, p18) argues that ‘while hegemony is being implemented, maintained and defended, it can be challenged and resisted in the interlocking realms of civil society, political society, and the state’. The protest on the part of the Bal Sabha to shed the hegemonic narration of them as criminals or destitute, symbolises counter-hegemony.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

Conclusively, what emerges from the analyses of power relations of ‘street children’ is that the unchallenged assumptions about their lives have reinforced the image of ‘street children’ in terms of ‘delinquency’ or ‘victimization’. Any attempt to ameliorate the lives of ‘street children’ would require engaging with the social structures and relations in a particular context.

The paper has thus attempted a critique of the shortcomings of the dominant conception of childhood, which rests on the notion of vulnerability and incompetence, victimizing ‘street children’. A crucial element that has emerged is that instead of viewing street children as existing outside of childhood or representing an abnormal form of it, we need to pay attention to the unique strategies they employ in managing their lives (Hecht, 1998), recognizing ‘street’ children as social actors, negotiating their identity by challenging the existing social power relations. Thus it problematized the approach, which perceives ‘street children’ as a ‘problem’ in need of ‘solution’, looking for the causes of ‘street child’ phenomenon, homogenizing ‘street children’, ignoring the unique circumstances of each child. One has to engage in ‘critical resistance’ and ‘unfinishedness’ (Freire, 1972), analysing the deeper structural causes associated with street children. It leads to more open engagement with and contamination by difference and the difference is essential to transform ways one sees the nature of reality, being and knowledge (Freire, 1972).

Another related key element is that the attempt to ameliorate ‘street children’ would require refuting the separate categories of ‘street children’, which attempt to provide ‘separate dedicated programmes’, thus isolating the children from the contexts. Thus within the ‘rights’ approach, the programmes which aim at building
skills and knowledge of the ‘street children’ would be jeopardized if they do not empower the children in terms of engaging in dialogue with stakeholders, thus challenging their perceptions towards them.
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