

Everyday Life of Street Children in Dhaka City, Bangladesh: An Anthropological Study

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Abstract: The study is an attempt to reveal the conditions of everyday life of the 'street children' Anthropologically in Dhaka city, Bangladesh. In this purpose the study has been conducted on certain number of 'street children' at three significant areas of Dhaka city. The central argument of this research is to examine how the notion of childhood of 'street children' is not merely a biological phenomenon but can be a socio-economic and cultural phenomenon. By providing ethnographic evidence from different settings in Dhaka city, I examine their migration and socio-economic background in order to show how the notion of childhood can work in material world beyond biological understanding. By examining this, the study also reveals how the 'street children' itself a problematic concept largely to be stigmatized by the concept of 'street children' and not to be treated as only 'children' like others.

Keywords: Everyday Life, Street Children, Dhaka City, Bangladesh.

1. INTRODUCTION

'Street children' are a special category of children because of their vulnerable and risky life pattern. The conditions of their life do not correspond to any standard of human life. It is full of uncertainty, insecurity and risk for abuse, drug addiction, disease and no access to education (Ali, 2012). 'Street Children' as a special group of children those who are in grave situation and helpless being deprived of the basic necessities of life, such as food, shelter, clothing and psychological supports. In the absence of the fulfillment of these basic needs, mere survival of the child becomes impossible and they grow up as unwanted members of the society. Because of the negligence they continue to suffer, these children grow as child labor, beggars, shoplifters, and pick-pickers, gangsters, low paid domestic servants, and so on. These are the children of the urban poor in socio-economic setting who are most vulnerable, exploited and who face the highest risks. They face untold hardship and danger on the streets. Living and working on the streets exacts a terrible toll on 'street children'. They are often preying to every physical and moral danger and as they grow older they often become a danger to others. After such precarious childhoods, most of them are condemned to spend their lives excluded from mainstream society. These all together indicate the unintended side effects of economic growth (Chowdhury, 2012). The increasing number of 'street children' has assumed serious proportions across the world and more particularly in the developing world. Under the compelling circumstances the international and national agencies as well as governments of these countries have made concerted efforts to comprehend the reasons behind this so as to evolve suitable means to address it (Pandey, 1993).

In this perspective, the study is intended to address the conditions of lives of the 'street children' including their childhood pattern in Dhaka City with the intension to gain better theoretical understanding about them. Their socio-economic aspects have been revealed properly in this purpose. Simultaneously, the study has examined how children become treated as a problematic issue by the 'street children' concept.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study has been conducted to attain some objectives. These objectives are as follows:

A) General Objective

The general objective of this study is to understand how the 'street children' are a socio-political being rather than biological being alone?

B) Specific Objectives

The study has adopted the following specific objectives to attain the above general objective:

1. To explore the socio-economic status of the 'street children' in Dhaka city.
2. To reveal the policy and programs of Bangladesh government and its reality in relation to 'street children'.
3. To uncover the conceptual and cultural construction of 'street children'.

3. METHODOLOGY

The descriptive method has been utilized to conduct this study. The Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban, High Court Mazar and Kamalapur Railway Station areas have been selected as the study areas. The children identified as 'street children' have been considered as primary source of data those who are typically 6-18 years old. In addition, the persons related in different ways with 'street children' and relevant documents have been considered as the secondary source of data. The purposive sampling method has been followed in this study. A total number of 31 'street children' (20 male and 11 female) have been selected in this method as the samples from the study areas. The study has been conducted through collecting necessary data from them and their related persons during 9 months period from March to November 2021.

4. FINDINGS

The study has presented the detailed qualitative analysis of collected data from different points of view which provide a real picture and very good insight about the lives or socio-economic background of the respondents. The 'street children' migrate to Dhaka city from different regions of Bangladesh for many reasons. After migrating in Dhaka city they face many difficulties, challenges, harassment and torture in socio-economic lives and struggle to survive here. Mostly they become engaged with any little work on the streets for earning livelihoods and helping their families. The empirical findings of everyday life of the 'street children' have been discussed below:

4.1. Reasons of 'Street Children's Migration in Dhaka City

There are several reasons behind the migration of 'street children' in Dhaka. The majority of the respondents in this study have been compelled to move in Dhaka city from their villages in the hope of survival because of living in severe difficulties for parental unemployment, poverty, hunger etc. those are created by natural disasters, river erosion, landlessness, uncertainty in agriculture, lack of industrial development in village, lack of capital and so on. Some of them have migrated for family conflict, persecution of step mother, escaping from home etc. Nilufa (12) narrates that "We are very poor. We have no any agricultural land. My father would catch fishes from the rivers. But now he cannot continue this work for imposing some difficult rules in this field by the government. So, we were passing our days with very difficulties. Having no other alternatives, we migrated to Dhaka from Bhola in the hope of survival".

Some respondents in my study have migrated by the inspiration of their relatives, friends and acquaintances in the hope that they will be able to live better in Dhaka city than the village. As Lemon (14) stated, "I came to Dhaka in the inspiration of one of my relatives. He would live in Dhaka beforehand. He made me expectant about the better things of Dhaka city than Barishal and eventually I migrated here with him". However, after moving to Dhaka city, most respondents believe that the social reality of Dhaka city is much more difficult than the village. Nobody find and care them here like the neighbors and relatives of the village. But there are more income opportunities here than villages. So they want to survive in this city in this way even though they have many troubles.

According to the data obtained, some respondents have moved to Dhaka city in last two years, but most of the respondents have been staying in Dhaka city for two to five years or more. It hints that the street children those who once migrate from village to Dhaka city do not want to leave this city easily.

4.2. Places of Staying at Night of 'Street Children'

The study explores about where the 'street children' spend their nights. It is shown, a large portion of the respondents spend the nights at slums. Others spend the nights at passenger's roofs, foot over bridges, market porches, parks, shelter home, railway stations etc. In these places the respondents usually spend the nights with family members ie parents, abandoned/widowed mothers, siblings, only fathers, relatives, friends and others. Thoma (9) quotes that "I stay with my family in a little house of

slum at Mohammadpur area. We rent this house but the amenities of this place are not good at all. Nevertheless, we stay there for the minimal security and comfort of lives”.

Those who spend the nights at passenger roofs, foot over bridges, market porches, parks and train station said that they do not have the ability to rent houses and stay at slums. In these places they can spend the nights free. Moreover, during the day they can earn livelihoods by doing various activities in these areas. But in these places they have to admit a lot of hardships in the nights. Riaz (13) says, “I stay at Kamlapur railway station for three years. I try to earn money to carry the luggages of rail passengers in the day and sleep at the station compound at night. I face many kinds of difficulties to sleep here at night. Nevertheless I have to stay here for not having any other alternative”.

The respondents those who spend the nights at government shelter home at Kamlapur get relatively a good environment. They can spend the nights free of cost there. Besides, they get free minimum meals, bath and toilet facilities. There is also provision for them to study and vocational training there.

It is also revealed in my study that the respondents change their places of living due to increase the house rent frequently, police harassment, night guard resistance, local mastan's impact and being considered uncomfortable. As Thoma (9) further mentions, “We live at the same slum from our arrival in Dhaka but we have changed our house several times because of intolerable increase of rent and some other problems”.

The respondents who spend the nights at passenger roof, foot over bridges, market porches, parks and railway stations said they have to stay up throughout the night for fear and panic. After some time the police come and tell them to leave; if late, they beat with a stick. According to the opinion of police, they are involved in the crime of theft, robbery, pocket making, drug addiction etc. In addition, the police, night guards also impede them for staying at these places overnight. Besides, if they find relatively comfortable places to spend nights then they voluntarily change their places of living.

4.3. Relationship of the ‘Street Children’ with whom they Sleep

The study reveals that the ‘street children’ usually spend the nights with their parents, abandoned/widowed mothers, siblings, only fathers, relatives, friends and others. All respondents those who spend nights with the parents, abandoned/widowed mothers and only father reported that they are staying with them at the slum rented houses. In the slums, they strive to remain with them in a family relationship. Thoma (9) describes that “I live with my mother including siblings at a house of slum. We are very poor and all of us fight continuously for survival. But always we try to stay in a body, it’s our satisfaction”. Those who spend nights at the shelter home reported that their brother or sister also staying there. Those who spend the nights at passenger roofs, foot over bridges, market porches, parks and railway station stay there with relatives, friends and other acquaintances.

It is explored in my study, when the ‘street children’ do not remain with their family members, most of them keep normal contact with family members by using mobile phones, going home after few months, going home at the end of the year, through relatives or by sending money through bkash. Lemon (14) mentions that “I normally maintain communication with my parents and other family members by mobile phone. As well as, I go home at every Eid festival for some days. Then I pass very delightful times with all of them”. However, some of them do not keep contact with their family members and relatives for some reasons, in addition, some of them try to contact if it is needed.

4.4 The ‘Street Children’ Whom with Related Except Family Members and Relatives

The ‘street children’ are differently related to other ‘street children’, elderly people staying on the streets, various shopkeepers, slum dwellers, local mastans, political cadres, policemen etc. except their family members and relatives. As Shohag (17) said, “While I stay on the streets meet with many more children like me. Some are older than me and some are younger. I talk to them every day; live in the same area, do the same thing and are struggling to earn the livelihood coming in Dhaka from similar families. As a result, a kind of relationship has been developed among us gradually. Besides, I have the acquaintance with some other persons”.

It is examined, the relationships of the ‘street children’ with these individuals often spread into common identities, friendships, working together, resting together, sleeping together, playing together, sharing joy, sorrow and feeling together, helping in danger or adversities, economic transaction etc. In this way, they become related in a fictive kinship with others.

4.5. Daily Food Consuming Status

The daily food consuming status of the respondents is very vulnerable. Many of them eat meals three times a day but a large portion gets the chance to eat twice a day and once a day. However, not a single respondent was found who does not eat even once a day. Shopna (10) narrates that “I live at the slum and often eat foods there. When I go out in the morning, eat food then if any have. At noon I eat at home if return otherwise try to eat a little outside. In addition after returning to the slum at night I eat if any have otherwise sleep without eating”. Those who stay at the shelter home, there are three times meals arrangement for them a day. If they can return according to the rules of the center, they take foods from there; otherwise eat whatever they can manage outside. Those who stay at passenger roofs, foot over bridge, market porches, parks and railway station usually buy or beg foods from street shops and hotels; sometimes collect abandoned dirty foods from the streets and dustbins and eat those.

Buying and eating nutritious foods like fish, meat, milk, eggs, etc. is a dream to them. As a result, these children suffer from malnutrition and various diseases throughout the year.

4.6. Economic Activities of ‘Street Children’

It is explored that each of the respondents is involved with some kind of microeconomic activity. They use different places of the study areas for this purpose. Their main economic source is begging. Besides, they earn money by selling flowers, selling water/nuts/ chocolates/popcorn/cigarettes, selling tea, porter works or carrying luggage, tokai work or collecting and selling abandoned things etc. All of the physically defectives and a significant portion of the capable are involved in begging. They understand that begging is disrespectful. But they think it as the easiest way to earn money. That's why they don't want to leave it. Dulal (11) describes that “I am a beggar. I can't do another work. So, I hold begging as an easier way to earn money. I think the time from afternoon to night is more useful for begging. Because there are more people gather outside during this period. I mainly target the passersby and visitors of TSC area and beg to them for my poverty and helplessness. But I can't earn equal money every day by begging. Some days I can earn more and some days less. Usually, I earn more money on weekly and public holidays and during festivals”. Those who sell flowers collect bakul flowers from different places and make garland and sell those.

Those who sell water/nuts/chocolates/popcorn/cigarettes etc. buy these in cash or due from any store at wholesale price and sell as retail. Thus they profit something. Those who sell tea usually prepare it first and carry it to people by flux for selling. Those who are coolies or carry luggage stay at Kamlapur Railway Station. They carry the luggage of arrived and leaving passengers at the station. Those who are the tokai (a common term of street children) try to make money to sell the abandoned goods to certain places collected from the dustbins, roads and various places during whole day. The respondents reported that they earn 20 to 250 taka through these works. The study reveals that the respondents are happy about their income.

4.7. Description of Using Baths and Toilets of the Respondents

Most of the respondents take regular baths. However, some of them do not take regular baths for various reasons. Emon (13) states that “In the searching of livelihoods, it is necessary to run from one place to another in sunshine, rain and dust whole day. As a result, the body takes a lot of sweats, dusts, dirt, muds and clothes become moldered. If I do not take bath in this situation, I feel very bad and sick. So I try to bathe every day. Some days bath is also taken several times if necessary. In this way, I try to stay clean and tidy”. Those who do not take regular baths reported that they do not take regular baths due to hurry, lack of timely return, lack of wearable clothes after bathing and unconsciousness.

It uncovers, the respondents generally use slum baths, tube wells, ponds-lakes, public toilets, tap-fountains of water set up at different locations, bathrooms at shelter home and so on as the places of baths. Emon (13) further states that “I remain at slum and often bathe there. But sometimes I take bath outside with friends as per the situation”. Those who stay at passenger roof, foot over bridges, market porches, parks and railway station usually take baths at pond-lakes, public toilets, various water taps-fountains and so on. The respondents of the shelter home try to bathe in the bathrooms there because of having better facilities. None of the respondents use soap-shampoo daily in the bath. However, now and then many of them use soap-shampoo. Some never use it.

The respondents usually use slum's toilets, public toilets, shelter home's toilets, mosque-market toilets, roadside's open spaces, open spaces of parks etc. as their latrines. Those who live at slum, they usually

use the toilets there. The respondents who are located at the passenger roof, foot over bridges, market porches, parks, railway station and shelter home always choose one of the conveniently located destinations for their discharge. The environment and public health are threatened for them those who use the open spaces of road sides and parks as toilets.

4.8. Diseases and Treatments of ‘Street Children’

It reveals, the ‘street children’ suffer more from various diseases throughout the year due to the vulnerable environment of lifestyle. The respondents of the study areas said that they are mainly infected from any disease of diarrhea-dysentery, gastric, fever-cold-cough, headache-migraine, jaundice, skin disease, sexually transmitted disease, asthma etc. throughout the year. Some of them suffer from multiple diseases at the same time.

They all drink the unpurified, unclean water supplied from ponds, lakes and Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (WASA) of various places and use it for bathing and other activities. As a result, diarrhea, dysentery, jaundice and various skin diseases often occur. They suffer from fever-cold-cough, headache-migraine, asthma, etc., due to spend nights in unclean and open places, lack of winter clothes, and seek livelihoods in sunshine-rain, dust and mud. They suffer from gastric as a result of not taking timely foods and consuming unhealthy foods. Tutul (9) mentions that “I pass my nights under the pedestrian’s roof at the High Court mazar area with my mother. I don’t get the opportunity to drink pure water and healthy foods at all. As well as, I sleep in the open space with many adverse environments. So, often I suffer by many diseases all year round specially by diarrhea, dysentery and skin disease”. In addition, some of them suffer from various sexually transmitted diseases due to uncontrolled sexual desire of the aged persons coming in contact to them.

Most of the ‘street children’ receive medical care from different sources to recover from these diseases. However, many of them said, they do not receive any medical care. Those who receive medical care, mostly receive from pharmacies and government hospitals. Some of others receive medical care from mazar-kabiraj-fakir, some from publicist-street vendors and some of them receive medical care from Non-Government Organization (NGO) health care centers.

The respondents who do not receive any medical care even after being sick, some of them think that it will be cured without any treatment, some think 'Allah has given disease and Allah will make cured also, no need any treatment for it' and some of the respondents do not receive any treatment due to poverty, sluggishness, unconsciousness, fear-constriction etc. As Tutul (9) further mentions, “Usually I don’t receive any medical care for my illness but if it is serious then I try to buy medicine from any pharmacy to describe the nature of my illness”.

4.9. Harassments and Tortures towards the ‘Street Children’

The lives of ‘street children’ are full with harassments and tortures. The harassments and tortures have been started to them since birth from family and village. These have not been terminated after relocating into Dhaka rather added new dimensions. Negligence of parents and family members due to poverty-scarcity, reprimands, beatings, as well as harsh eyes of neighbors and villagers and various slander were the most common phenomenon of their rural lives. After migration in Dhaka, they become victims of various harassments and tortures; such as, become regularly deported by police and night guards, beaten by community people, forced to carry illegal weapons and bombs by local mastans, forced to carry drugs of dealers, forced to join in political processions and picketing, forced to help in stealing and pick pocketing, forced to help in prostitution and being sexually harassed, being used and controlled by elder beggars, insult and reproofs etc.

It reveals, the respondents who stay and spend nights at passenger roof, foot over bridges, market porches, parks and railway station, the police and night watchmen harass them constantly. As Riaz (13) informs, “I pass nights at Kamlapur railway station compound and often become expelled from this place by the police and night watchmen. They say this public place is not for spending nights and order to leave it. If it is too late to leave the place they beat me with stick. Then being compelled I leave the place and seek shelter elsewhere. If any stealing, hijacking, robbery or another unpleasant incident is occurred in this compound, sometimes they arrest me with suspicion and beat me for confession. Sometimes I become handed over to the police”. At the slums and other locations of Dhaka city, the street children also become harassed and tortured in many ways.

4.10. Recreation Sources of the Respondents

There are no any scopes of creative, constructive and captivating recreations for 'street children'. No cricket, football, basketball, hockey, kabadi, racing, swimming etc. competitions are organized for them. They do not have the opportunity to be spectators in these sports competitions also. Organizing tours, picnics, music, poetry recitals, plays, painting competitions etc. are beyond of their reach.

It reveals, in Dhaka city, they mainly try to entertain by watching television in different places, watching porn music videos and pictures on Video Compact Disk (VCD), going to the cinema hall to watch films, wandering to different places, playing and gossiping with friends and by smoking and drinking drugs. As Shopna (10) says, "Usually I try to watch television at the slum and various street-side shops. I like more to watch plays, movies and music on television. I have no any attraction to news and educational programs". Hasan (11) describes that "I like wandering, playing cricket and larking with friends. So, when I get time, try for wandering, as well as play, lark and gossip with friends and others around my residence and on the streets with some new created friends in the leisure of working period. Besides, when I suffer by tiredness, exhaustion and various mental disturbances, then try to get out from these situations and seek peace through smoking or drug addictions. In this way, I try to entertain myself and pass good times".

4.11. Strategies of 'Street Children' for Adapting with Different Weathers

It reveals that the 'street children' take some strategies to adapt with different weathers. The respondents reported that they have to survive in the summer, rainy and winter-these three seasons facing different adversities and difficult realities. Those who remain at slums often spend day and nights in severe discomfort during the summer because of frequent load shedding. That is why many of them try to stay under the trees of the adjacent parks at leisure time and some spend the nights under the open sky or under the trees there. Many of them drink more water and try to take more baths, so that the body becomes cool and the intensity of the heat is felt less.

In the winter, they pass very inhuman lives. As Tutul (9) narrates, "In the winter, me and my mother spend days and nights in unbearable troubles. We cannot afford to buy the hot clothes needed for the winter. We mainly wear the collected blankets and abandoned clothes during the winter which are distributed as relief items by various charitable persons and organizations. These are not enough to protect us from the severe winter of the open spaces of outsides. So, sometimes we try to take the heat from day to night whenever possible making fire with various abandoned items and staying by it".

Rainy season is another name of distress to the respondents. Due to unprotected and open spaces, they suffer by unbearable distress at the time of storms, rains and thunderbolts and remember the Creator for self-defense. This time many of them try to use more plastic sheets or polythene papers over and around their living spaces. If proper self-defense is not possible by it, they try to take their positions under any safer installations or roofs in the rainfall.

5. CONCLUSION

The study is an endeavor to reveal the conditions of everyday life of 'street children' Anthropologically in Dhaka city through searching their background, way of living, style, struggle to survive including their food, housing, activities, health, education, treatment and other socio-economic things as well as their childhood pattern after being identified as 'street children'.

I have argued in my study that the childhood of 'street children' is different from other privileged children. It indicates the distinct nature of childhood. The existing literatures show the childhood which basically denotes the biological and evolutionary aspect of life stages based on age, growth, physical structure and place. In my study, I have argued that the dynamic nature of childhood of 'street children' contains the socio-economic and cultural aspects beyond of age, biology and place. It has been uncovered, being very little how a 'street child' takes the role and responsibility of adult parents in terms of running family to earn the livelihood by struggling on the streets.

I have further argued that being a destitute and vulnerable group, the children are being continuously stigmatized by the concept of 'street children'. Because, the children become thrown on the streets only for earning money. Without earning money or livelihood there is no other relationship between these children and the streets. They have taken the streets of Dhaka city as the source of their income. There are so many other persons and children those who accept other sources for their income apart from

streets but they do not be stigmatized as their income source's name. So, it is inhuman and violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Children (CRC) declaration to be only stigmatized the children working on the streets as 'street children'. Rather they should be addressed as only 'children' like others. Because according to the Convention on the Rights of the Children (CRC) and existing Bangladesh Child Policy, all children should possess equal right, dignity and opportunity in all respects. They should not be distinguished according to their perspectives and place.

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