Chapter 3

Urban Poverty and Vulnerability of Street Children

India is the second most populous country in the world with an estimated 400 million children up to the age of 18 (UNFPA, 2005). Acceleration in economic growth has made India among the 10 fastest growing economies of the world. It ranks 115th among 162 countries according to Human Development Index. As per the 2001 census report, the rate of urbanization in India was 28.77 percent. In the past few decades, urbanization and urban growth have accelerated in many developing countries. In 1970, 37 percent of the world’s population lived in the cities. In 1995 this figure was 45 percent, and the proportion was expected to cross 50 percent by 2005 (UN 1995). The report says that for the first time in world history, more than half of the global population would be living in the cities. In India, however, it was estimated that the urban areas hold less than 30 percent of the population and it is expected to grow to 40.7 percent by 2030 (UNFPA, 2007).

The Indian urban scenario has been summarized as the 2-3-4-5 syndrome by a demographer. In the last decade, India grew at an average annual growth rate of 2 percent, urban India grew at 3 percent, mega cities at 4 percent and slum populations rose by 5 percent. The demographer abridged that if such a trend continues, India will have only slums and no cities (Agarwal S. Sagan. K, 2005).

Magnitude of Urban Poverty:

There was no consensus on a definition of urban poverty but two broad complementary approaches were prevalent: economic and anthropological interpretations. Conventional economic definitions used indicators like income or consumption complemented by a range of other social indicators such as life expectancy, infant mortality, nutrition, the proportion of the household budget spent on food, literacy, school enrolment rates, and access to health clinics or
drinking water, to classify poor groups against a common index of material welfare. Alternative interpretations developed largely by rural anthropologists and social planners working with rural communities in the third world, it allows for local variation in the earning of poverty, and expand the definition to encompass perceptions of non-material deprivation and social differentiation (Rachel Masika, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, 1997). Anthropological studies of poverty have shown that people’s own conceptions of disadvantage often differ from those of professional experts. Great value was attached to qualitative dimensions such as independence, security, self-respect, identity, close and non-exploitative social relationships, decision-making freedom and legal and political rights. Moreover, there has been a widening of the debates on poverty to include more subjective definitions such as vulnerability, entitlement and social exclusion. These concepts have been useful for analyzing what increases the risk of poverty and the underlying reasons why people remain in poverty. Vulnerability was not synonymous with poverty, but refers to defencelessness, insecurity and exposure to risk, shocks and stress. Vulnerability is reduced by assets, such as: human investment in health and education; productive assets including houses and domestic equipment; access to community infrastructure; stores of money, jewelleries and gold; and claims on other households, patrons, the government and international community for resources at times of need. Whereas, entitlement refers to the complex ways in which individuals or households command resources which vary between people over time in response to shocks and long-term trends. Social exclusion was seen as a state of ill-being and disablement or disempowerment, inability which individuals and groups experience. It manifested in ‘patterns of social relationships in which individuals and groups were denied access to goods, services, activities and resources which were associated with citizenship (Wratten 1995).

**Food Insecurity in Urban India:**

World Food Programme (WFP) indicates that more than 38 per cent of children under the age of 3 years in Indian cities and towns are underweight and more than 35 per cent of children in urban areas are stunted. The report states that the poor population in India’s burgeoning urban areas do not get the requisite
amount of calories or nutrients specified by Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) norms and also suggests that absorption and assimilation of food by the urban poor was further impaired by non-food factors such as inadequate sanitation facilities, insufficient housing and woeful poor access to clean drinking water. More than 21 per cent of India's urban population lived in slums, and 23 per cent of urban households did not have access to toilet facilities. Also, it was estimated that about 8 per cent of urban households were unable to find safe drinking water. Livelihood access was vital in achieving urban food security. Large sections of lower income groups depend on casual employment or are self-employed in petty businesses and these types of employment were usually accompanied by uncertain income. For the country as a whole, more than 14 percent of the urban population was dependent on casual labour as a means of livelihood. For the lowest 10 percent of the urban population in India, 37.49 percent were engaged in casual labour and 41.34 per cent were self-employed, suggesting that a vast majority of the urban poor were vulnerable to uncertain incomes and hence, vulnerable to undernourishment. In urban lower income classes, Schedule Caste (SCs) groups outnumber other social groups. For urban India, as a whole, 47.5 per cent of the urban SC population was in the four lowest monthly expenditure classes. For the urban Scheduled Tribe (ST) population, the proportion was 43.1 per cent and for the urban Other Backward Castes (OBCs) population, the proportion was 36.9 per cent. In comparison, for sections of society other than SCs, STs and OBCs, only 20 per cent belong to the four lowest groups (Murali Kanta, 2006).

Urban poverty and vulnerability:
The estimated urban poverty in West Bengal was 22.41 percent (4.47 million). The estimate was based on the poverty line of Rs 247.91 per capita per month. The Planning Commissions estimates suggest that urban poverty in West Bengal show a decelerating trend over the years. However, this decrease in official urban poverty rate does not provide any room for complacency as the estimate refers to calorie consumption definition of poverty though the actual magnitude of urban poverty in terms of intensity and dimension was much wider. The multi dimensional approach was also not free from limiting poverty analysis within fixed measures and it was in this concept that vulnerability
assumes greater significance with wider conceptual formulations. Poverty was based on fixed measures where as vulnerability was dynamic as it covers the multifaceted aspects of socio economic changes.

An average of 50 percent of the urban population live in conditions of extreme deprivation - compounded by lack of access to basic services and legal housing and poor urban governance. There has been conflicting assessment report on urban poverty. As per conservative official estimate, 27 percent of total urban populations were below poverty line whereas an independent estimation found that 37 percent was poor population. Before the Planning Commission accepted the advice of the Lakdawala Committee on poverty, the official estimate of urban poverty was 20 percent (1987-88). The Lakdawala Committee Report suggested an upward revision to 83 million (40 percent of the urban population) for the same year. The report estimated that in 1991, poverty level was reported at more than 89 percent in the slums of Kolkata (EHP-CINI ASHA, 2004)

Settlement Pattern of Urban Poor in Kolkata:

Kolkata is the second largest city of India having 4,580,544 people residing in 187.33 Sq Km area. It is the home to five Nobel laureates and is the nerve centre of intellect and human values, where many modern movements began in art, cinema and theatre, science and industry. India's quest for freedom also began in this city. Still the city is considered as the gateway, commercial and communication hub for the North-East Indian states. The cultural and commercial values of the Kolkata attract people from diversified caste and religions not only from different parts of West Bengal and India but from other neighbouring countries as well. With urbanization and shrinkage opportunities in gainful employment in rural areas and on the other hand economic pull in the city accelerated the migration of a large number of poor people in the city.

A very large section of Kolkata’s population lives in abject poverty in slums and squatter colonies all over the city. About one third of the population of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) lives in the slums. The estimated slum population in Kolkata was 1,490,811 according to the 2001 census. It was one of the densely populated cities with a population of 24,429 per square km. In
terms of number of total slum population; it was second largest in India (The Kolkata Municipal Corporation, Operations and Initiatives, 2003). According to the Lakdawala Committee, the poverty level was estimated more than 89 percent in the slums of Kolkata which was higher than Bangalore (73%) and Chennai (77.2%). Most of these people were generally engaged in low wage sectors. They were found to be settled in low cost settlements near the railway station, bus stands, markets, big colonies and also on the pavements and railway platforms because of the employment opportunities and easy connectivity with other parts of the city.

According to the official record of KMC, there are about 2,011 registered and 3,500 unregistered slums within 141 municipal wards. Kolkata also has a floating population of 60,00,000 who commute to the city daily from the nearby districts for work (The Kolkata Municipal Corporation, Operations and Initiatives, 2003). The population of Kolkata was growing over the years with a steady increase in slum population.

The settlement pattern of Kolkata’s poor population was categorized as under two broad heads.

- People settled in authorized slums
- People settled in unauthorized slums and squatters.

**Authorized Slums:**

The authorized slums can be classified into two broad categories.

- Tenant slums are owned by landowners or huts, built by the middlemen and is rented out to the poor migrant families.
- Refugee Resettlement Colonies are settlement constructed on the land leased out for 99 years to the refugees from Bangladesh by the government at nominal rents.

The slums located in the heart of the city are as old as 150 years and was developed during the pre-industrial area. The relatively recent slums were located in the outskirts of the city. In these authorized slums, people are
recognized as legal residents and were entitled to basic amenities such as
portable water, electricity, and road. People pay a fixed monthly rental for
their house and electricity. The Government of West Bengal had enacted Thika
Tenancy Act, 1981, which protects tenants from eviction. The families settled
in these types of settlements were also entitled to enjoy benefits of different
welfare schemes.

Unauthorized Slums:

People settled in unauthorized areas were considered as illegitimate dwellers
and government does not provide any facilities. These families were generally
settled in sub-rental groups living on the slum edges, urban periphery that
have not been legalized, vacant government land and encroachments on the
roadside. These families are comparatively new to the cities, dislocated from
the city itself or retrenched from their work place and or displaced due to
increase in family size. These groups are among the poorest families and are
routinely omitted from the official figures. If all these groups are accounted
for, then the estimates of urban poverty would be much higher.

Kolkata Municipal Corporation from time to time reviews their official records
and recognizes some of the slums considering the legalities of the land on
which the families have settled. The families who are settled on the
encroachments of the road or pavements are most vulnerable in terms of their
settlement pattern. Authorities conduct routine eviction drives to drive the
families away from pavements.

Walking down the streets of Kolkata, the most visible section of the society is
the families settled on the streets with their children. The number of street
living families in Kolkata has steadily increased over the years because of
urbanization. These families have migrated from poverty stricken districts and
states and immigrated to the city in search of a suitable livelihood options.
Though this section is visible on the streets they are invisible in the official
records. No official figures are available about the actual number of families
living on the pavements without any shelter and other amenities of life. In the
year 2008, Action Aid conducted a rapid assessment study to estimate the
actual figure. According to their survey report an estimated 58,997 homeless persons living in the city. Among these homeless populations, children constitute about a half of the population. These populations are not included in the census figure as they do not live in “Census houses”. Thus, the questions of any resource allocation do not arise. Rather, they are being seen as illegal residents in the city who have no claim over the State’s resources (Action Aid, 2008).

Government of India recognizes that the urban population play a vital role in the socio-economic transformation and contribute to 50-55 percent of the total GDP of the country. To create economically productive, efficient, equitable responsive cities, Government of India has launched Jawaharlal Neheru Rural and Urban Renewal Mission in the year 2008. The broad objectives are as follows:

- Integrated development of Urban Infrastructure
- Structural reformation and efficiency of urban governance
- Provision of basic services to urban poor through integrated development of slums that includes housing and development of infrastructure in slum settlements.

Thus, the scheme aims to improve the inner environment of the city through a collaborative effort of urban development and poverty alleviation departments and also encourages public private partnership in the whole endeavour (Jawaharlal Neheru Rural and Urban Renewal Mission in the year 2008). Instead of this policy the families living on the streets of Kolkata will be deprived as they do not have any legal identity and basic entitlements. Thus, though this scheme created a ray of hope for the urban poor but the families living on authorized land and has land entitlements will only be benefited through the scheme. A number of developmental organizations, academic institutes are working on the loopholes of the scheme and advocating with government to uphold the entitlement rights of homeless populations.
Conclusion:

The present study has been conducted among the children of families who are settled on the streets of Kolkata. These populations are considered as illegitimate section of the city because of the settlement pattern. Broadly speaking the growth of street families are the consequence of vicious poverty cycle, out migration from the rural areas due to rural landlessness, unemployment and lack of coordination between rural and urban policy makers. Children of these families live in appalling and inhuman conditions and are the victims of this social, economic and political complicacy. Living on the fringe of society and disadvantaged by the pressures of poverty and insecurities, these children are exposed to various forms of physical, economical and sexual exploitation. Their basic minimum rights are grossly violated and they are debarred from the mainstream of the society.