CHAPTER 3
SOCIAL PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

Being a qualitative study, social profiles of the participants were discovered through open communications, in focused group discussions and in-depth interviews. The information received was mostly scattered throughout interactions with them. This information was compiled together to ascertain the socio-economic backgrounds but it needs to be noted that for some participants, vital data about their past life could not be received as these adolescents do not remember what transpired in their young childhood years. Considering the term ‘street children’ and the term ‘mobility’ associated with it, the distinctiveness of each individual’s journey was expected. The following chapter thus, looks at this distinct ways of *being* under the broad term of ‘street children’.

**Street Children: Revisiting the Definition**

‘Street children’ as a term has varied meanings and definitions. Over the last two decades, the comparatively rigid understanding of street children, structured around their classification on the basis of ‘purpose of staying on the street’ and ‘contact with families’ (Lusk 1992; Patel 1990; UNICEF 1989) has taken a flexible turn to acknowledge ‘street children’ as a more fluid category, comprising of children going through a transition to and from streets. (Motala and Smith 2003). This understanding of ‘street children’ was reapproved in the present study, specifically for the Indian context, when social profiles of the participants associated with organizations (catering to ‘street children’) were found to be fairly diverse. But the loopholes in categorizing children and their problems have also been emerging. (Kalra 2012). Not because of anything else but the fact that experiences are not to be put in stiff categories. Experiences of children included their movement between home, street, juvenile shelters and observation homes and sometimes back to the street and the native place were seen confounding with each other thus, making their social profiles distinct. This mobility in the population under study and the flexible boundaries has led plenty of studies conducted the world to have categorized street children to fit
certain methodological criterion. For example, on one side, Plummer, Kudrati and Dafalla (2007) in Sudan, created two separate categories of street children and working children to see the differences in life experiences. Another researcher, Duyan (2005) compared the characteristics and the intensity of street experiences among abandoned children and formerly abandoned children, i.e. those who are living on the streets as compared to those who have moved to an institutionalized set up; calling them abandoned and not street children per say. His study was closer to the understanding of present research in the sense of acknowledging the aspect of ‘movement’. But although he just looked at the comparisons without visiting the pasts of those presently living in the rehabilitation homes, this study acknowledges the aspect of temporality and transition through the past to present and towards the future. Although the study is crossectional in every way, it does recognize the accumulation of experiences across life by an individual instrumental in his construction of the self. The following sections of the chapter hence, point out, how the categorization of ‘street children’ or children on/off the streets needs to acknowledge that a child’s relationship with the street can be very flexible, thus having an implication on his/her self identity, as discussed in the following chapters. A look at the profiles of the participants supports this argument.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The four organizations from which data was collected, shared a common goal of working with marginalized and vulnerable children, specifically, street children and/or run away children. The organizations had different models for working with their target population. While education was considered one of the most significant tools for helping the children get out of a poverty stricken life and move towards a stabilized future, the plan for providing food and shelter differed among the three. Out of a total of 24 boys, eighteen were living in organizations where they were provided shelter, along with food and education. Staying in the organization (B), one group comprising eight adolescents did not have any contact with the streets since some time. Whereas in another organization (C), the other group was in constant touch with the open spaces of the city, because even though they were provided food, shelter and
education at the “centre” (the way participants refer to the organizational set up), they were ‘allowed’ to visit their friends in the streets during vacations.

**Age and Gender**

Out of a total of thirty five participants, eleven were girls and twenty four were boys. Participants ranged from the age group of 15 to 18 years. (Figure 3.1) Data on the age at which they landed up on the streets was incomplete as many participants did not remember that time clearly. The most common response when asked “*since when do you remember being on the streets?*” or “*at what age did you land up on the streets?*” the response was “*bachpan se*”. Most of those who had migrated to the city with their families had a specific number in mind for the age. Based on all the responses, the time at which the child lands up on the street, with or without family, was found to be around middle childhood, i.e. between the age of 7 to 11 years. Most studies suggest a similar developmental stage for children to come in contact with the streets for the first time. (Benegal et al. 1998; Huang et al. 2004; Mathur 2009; Rizzini and Butler 2003).

![Figure 3.1: Age of the participants](image)

Total number of females who participated in the study was eleven. Out of these, six belonged to organization D and five belonged to organization A. In total, four were
Currently living on the streets with their families; the other seven were living in the night shelters of the organizations but maintained regular contact with the street.

**Figure 3.2: Gender of the participants**

This data clearly shows that the males were more in number as compared to females. Also, out of those eleven girls who were part of the study, only two had lived without their families and that too for not more than two weeks. This asks for a contemplation on the reasons for lack in number of independently living girls on the streets, and if they do, why for such a less amount of time. Studies across the world have proved that the number of girls on the streets are considerably less than boys (Aptekar 1994; Benegal 1998; Duyan 2005; Huang et.al. 2004, Mathur 2009; Plummer, Kudarati and Dafalla, 2007; Praveen et al. 2008; Save the Children 2011; Sharma and Joshi 2013; TISS-Action Aid 2013). Why do the dwindling numbers exist in girls, is a question that needs to be answered. In an attempt to find out, a study conducted by Yoder, Whitebeck and Hoyt (2001) in the American midwestern states, came to the conclusion that even if the reasons are the same, the probability of females to run away from home and landing directly on the streets is less than boys. Here, they propose that it could be because females avoid the hazards of the streets by opting for shelter support, much more than boys. Results from this representative study support in certain ways, the present findings. The researcher came across two girls who had lived on the street by themselves, less than those who lived with their family or in the shelter. These two girls
were also recognized very early, by an entry level organization, working on the busiest railway stations of Mumbai, the hub of the so called ‘street children’. Thus, the direct experience of girls independently on the streets could not be captured in-depth.

**Educational Status**

Thirty one of the total thirty five participants are currently attending regular schools in Mumbai. The remaining four are girls, two of whom are currently living on the streets with families and dropped out of school in standard six and eight. They are currently attending non-formal education provided by the centre. One of the girls is also receiving job skills training programme. The schools attended are private and public. Supportive education to help them with their studies in school is also provided by the organization.

Education is one aspect that differentiates adolescents who made a transition from streets to the shelters from the ones, who are still living on the streets. These two categories were listed by a rare study (Huang et al. 2004) comparing abandoned children (those currently on the street) and formerly abandoned children (those who are living in institutional settings). They suggested through a quantitative descriptive analysis that the abandoned street children are more at risk and prone to various forms of abuse, as compared to the formerly abandoned children but the study restricts from giving any reasons. Looking at the fact that education has been the central aspect of rehabilitation in these organizations, it could be proposed as one of the major aspects making them stay away from risky and dangerous habits. Exposure to education should be noted as an outlet to a world different from the one they have seen in the past. Attending schools has provided an opportunity to the participants to see a life different from the one they had full control over. The mention of the school as their present environments came up in the discussions of the present and is seen in a strong connection with their lives in the past and of course seen influencing their plans for future. This calls for further enquiry in the area and use of empirical methods to assess the role of education in making children on the streets construct a sense of self.
Contact with Families

Contact with families is seen as a major indicator for classifying children as real or not (Cosgrove 1990). Such a rigid categorization falls redundant in the wake of present findings. As mentioned earlier, contact with families is a highly fluid indicator for suggesting if a person “belongs” to the street or not. Findings of the study suggested range of aspects associated with contact with family. Nine participants (six boys and three girls) were living or had lived ‘on the street’ with their families. Three female participants were constantly in touch with their parents (also in the same city), even while staying in the organization. It is worth noticing that all three had been brought up in single parent families, and connected with parents and siblings more profoundly than others. The ‘first-phase’ shelter for runaway girls, i.e. organization (A), identified girls roaming independently at streets/stations and other open and public spaces of the city. Two such girls were part of the study. Other three from the same organization were identified as vulnerable even while staying on the pavements with their families and thus, this organization provided them educational support along with safety and security.

The other two organizations (B) and (C) to which sixteen male participants belonged, had thirteen boys living in the shelter with no contact with their families since at least last three years, ranging up to eleven years. Remaining three boys were sleeping at their parents’ homes while spending their days on the street. All three of them were admitted to the shelters through orders of the Child Welfare Committees. Two of them had their parent visiting them often in the centre. Thus, when looked closely, those thirteen boys have also had different experiences with family. Those who were sent by parents to earn money in the city, visited the families every now and then, until they found themselves lost into the crowd of the big city. Receiving similar interventions in the organizations did not mean that these boys can be put into a singular category of street children. Rather, their life histories challenged their categorization into any domains considered natural for definition of street children.

Thus, more males had no or minimal contact with families as compared to the girls, most of whom lived with their families on the street. A recent census conducted by Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in collaboration with Action
Aid led to similar findings (2013), i.e. the males living on the streets without families are much more than girls. Although, the contact with families varied for participants, their life experiences differed on the street based on their survival in the open spaces of the city, with or without families. Figure 3.3. explains the differences in contact with family based on gender.

![Figure 3.3: Living with and without families on the street](image)

The heterogeneity in the sample with regard to their characteristics makes one realize the existing definitions of ‘street children’ which have seen a change with the turn of the 21st century. (Panter-Brick 2002). The criticism regarding these perceptive generalizations is fully supported by findings of the present study. Panter –Brick stresses on the fact that “street children” is a term restricting the types of children actually visible and not visible on the streets, whether maintaining contact with families or not. The two or three dimensional focus on the street environment, as he puts it, need to be checked for a better portrayal of children. She focuses on the different categories of children existing in the umbrella term of ‘street children’ and that these differences need to be acknowledged.
Movement between Home, Street and the Shelter: Tracing the Transition

The present study came across adolescents with diversified histories of transition from the home to street and finally to the shelter. Firstly, the movement from the family to the street is not a onetime event. It is a gradual process of the child usually moving away from home due to multiple reasons and then being pulled back to the family. So, the ‘running away’ is usually not a one shot event. This trend which has earlier been discovered by Aptekar (1988) and Visano (1990) and in Mumbai street children by Kombarakaran (2004) was also seen in the participants of this study who remembered multiple attempts at running away and the last one being to have brought them to Mumbai. The interaction between the street and shelter was cyclical for many participants making it a nonlinear process. Also, contact with families, used as a major factor for categorization of street children by Cosgrove (1990), was different for the participants. Addressing these heterogeneities requires a deeper look at the individual characteristics of adolescents with similar and dissimilar backgrounds.

Also, each individual’s narration of the experiences of the street was found to be influenced by life led in the shelter homes as well as their ways of dealing with the crises associated with developmental stage of adolescence. This is in consistence with recent recognition of fluidity of the children on and off street and realizing that street might not represent the sum total of their experiences. (Panter- Bric 2002). Different contexts of these experiences were called ‘domains’ in the classic work of Lucchini (1996) who connected the self identity of street children in Montevideo to their interaction with these domains.

Identification of participants was directly related to the time they had spent on the street. Interestingly, more the number of years spent, and more the independence enjoyed, more connected it made them feel with the street, but not necessarily positively. In the life of all the thirty five participants, there has been an on-going movement between the parental/native home, street and the shelter. Migration is always stated as one of the major reasons for existence of street children. (Mathur 2009; Rizzini and Butler 2003). For the boys who ran away from home for any reason, the transition from the home to the ‘street’ or, from “gaon” (village) to “shehar” (city) has been mainly one sided. Even though, there has been a movement
from native villages to the ‘big city’, for twelve respondents, a linear transition between the street and the shelter has not happened. There have been contacts with the place of origin for some, especially for those living with families on the street, the permanent shift back to the village is not to be seen or expected. A very few who have had their families in the city but still made the street their habitual abode, make these boundaries of home and street permeable. These loose margins vanish when families are living with the children ‘outside’.

Having said so, Lucchini’s portrayal of the street was an in-between phase among different “domains”, i.e. home and the shelter, and that a child feels at ease in the street if he/she has access to other domains, suggesting that street is like a staging post between different domains. Findings from the present study are different from this assumption of street having a transitory character. Boys who have lived on the streets for a longer time and those who are constantly in touch with that life of freedom and independence, have their personal identities closely associated with the streets. These participants are not necessarily working on the street as expected by Lucchini (1996). The identification of the ‘self’ of being “sadak chhap” (D’Souza 2012) or “raste pe rehne waale” was evident among adolescents living on the streets/pavements with their families. For them (especially for boys), street was more over-powering as an experiential domain than the organization.

Figure 3.4: The Movement: More bilateral than linear
All the participants were migrants from various parts of the country, like Bihar, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Rajasthan etc. Previous studies have suggested similar trends. (Kombarakaran 2004; Mathur 2009). Those living with family, remember the transition from village to the big city. For some, this transition of the family from their native villages was a slow process, i.e., the father moving first, trying to settle and then the family moving to the city to live with him. Most of the adolescents staying on the street living without their families, also remember being migrants from their villages but memories of leaving the village and coming to Mumbai are hazy. For a few, Mumbai was a city they settled in after roaming around to various other cities in the country.

**Family Background**

Families of participants were similar and dissimilar in many ways. Socio-economic status of the families was low as proved in earlier studies. (Mathur 2009). Some families had made progress in the sense of moving from the open spaces to a *kholi* (hutment) which the participants considered as movement towards better living conditions. Those who had left their families back in the village remember the institution being poverty stricken. The relationships in most cases were disturbed. Almost all the studies in India which have looked into the reasons for coming to street suggest disturbed family relationships as an important factor. (D’Lima and Gosalia 1992; Mathur 2009; TISS–Action Aid 2013). Nine of the fifteen living with the families had alcoholic parents and/or siblings, mostly the father and brothers and in a few cases, mother and grandmother as well. Studies conducted earlier also suggest the prevalence of substance abuse in family, making the children more prone to substance abuse on the streets. (Sharma and Lal 2011). Nine shared that their parents are/were living on the streets with them. A recent study by TISS along with Action aid (2013) & Kombarakaran (2004) suggested that bigger numbers of street children in Mumbai with families as compared to without families. Six of the thirty five participants belonged to single parent families. But putting them directly under the umbrella term of ‘disturbed’ or dysfunctional families would not be the appropriate thing to do. As perceived by participants themselves, the life with their parent is how they have
known their family. For example, for one girl, life with the mother was the only way of being. She said “papa toh chala gaya chhodh ke. Uske baare mein kya sochna. Main aur mummy hain khush apne mein” (Father left us. Why to think about him. Its just me and my mother, happy with each other.)

This girl was brought up just by her mother, told the story of her father leaving them after a violent marriage. That and some related incidents forced them to move to the big city for making a living. Such situational factors made single parent families disturbed but the relationship with the parent per say was strong, more than ordinary.

For another girl, life in a household with a single father and two brothers has made the absence of a mother figure very strong and she is trying every day to act as a substitute for her in the family.

…I feel very lonely that there is no one to take care of me. If there is someone your own, you can tell them everything. If I had a mother or sister, I could have shared my responsibilities with them.

Although the attachment with the father was immense, the situational demands of the family made it a troublesome scenario. It is worth noticing that in spite of the difficult circumstances, none of these girls broke contact with the parent even while staying in the night shelter of the organization. This speaks about their commitment towards the parent and sometimes siblings who they felt responsible towards.

But the relationship was clearly disturbed in a families when a step-parent was involved. For example, one boy had just his father as family, living in a one room house in Mumbai. His mother had left when the participant was seven years old and never returned. Relationship with the father was extremely cordial until the father was discovered to be engaged in a relationship with a woman in the neighbourhood. The boy was forced to call her ‘mother’ and when he did not accept it, the situation at home became disturbed, making him stay aloof from the father as well. Step parents emerged as a stronger factor influencing the relationship of the participant with the family, as interpreted by the stories told. Two participants (one boy and one girl)
shared in the group meetings and personal interviews that they were raised by their step mothers. Both of them stated issues of clear discomfort with their mothers in retrospect. The boy told how his mother used to make him do all the household work, “jaise main ladki hun…ladkiyon jaise kaam karati thi” (Used to make me work if I was a girl). He expressed his feeling of being trapped in the house and unable to do “fun” things that the other boys of his age could do. As per the other girl participant, her step mother was a “bad” women who along with her step grandmother would force her to do all the household work and give nothing to eat.

**Relationship with Family Members**

Relationship with family members is clearly associated with leaving home and as analyzed later, was found to be a crucial indicator of the social, psychological and behavioural characteristics of adolescents, whether currently in contact with the family or not. Not just as a reason to leave home, but as hope to some day connect back with them was also a side of their relationship with the parent and other family members. Thus, not necessarily stressful, but positive emotional attachment towards their parents and even siblings, also influence adjustment on the street/shelter and their plans for the future. Those, who engage with their parents/relatives on a day to day basis, share very different relationship dynamics, as compared to those who have left home and maintained little or no contact with their families. Those who are without parents, have mixed responses towards the question regarding family. Some of them miss parents but none of them wanted to go back because they enjoyed the independence of the street. But, the children with families feel more responsible and ‘trapped’ by the ties of the family. This interesting relationship has been discovered by Mathur (2009) in her study of the socialization of children in Jaipur City. She found out that children (living with or without family) do feel affection towards mother, brothers, father and sisters (in that order based on the percentages arrived at), but do not want to go back home. However, she does not elucidate the different ways in which these two categories of children associate with the family while living on the street. However, with regard to happiness, both the children living with and living
without families looked similar in her study. But the present study suggests that the ‘happiness’, specifically in context of the relationship with family, is different.

One boy has been in the centre for four years had before that, had spent nine years on the street. He feels bad when asked where his native village is because he doesn’t remember where he comes from. The identity of place is closely associated with his personal identity as an individual. He recalls that his family consisted of his mother, grandparents and two younger siblings. They all lived on the street and begged for a living. He must have been around five years old when he got separated from his mother at a crowded station in Mumbai and got lost. His love for the mother and the regret of losing her is clearly visible, even though he doesn’t remember either her face or her name. This loss greatly affected his adjustment in the centre in the initial few years. He reported to have made multiple attempts to run away from the centre and find her but to no avail. This example shows confusion with regard to the family and thus, the lack of knowledge of his origin does trouble him a lot.

During personal interviews, one male participant shared his grief at the loss of his elder sister. This sixteen years old boy came to Mumbai with his sister about seven years ago. His father had sent the children to study in a better school in the big city while they lived with their uncle. In a few weeks, the children found themselves trapped in a cycle of sexual and verbal abuse. In an attempt to escape, they both ran away and landed up on the streets. The boy as a ‘brother’, felt a strong feeling of protection for his sister. He tried maintaining her as much as he could but lost her in the crowd one day. He made efforts to find her but could not. Even today i.e., after almost six years, he looks for her whenever he goes ‘out’. He feels immense pain and longing for his sister coupled with tangential guilt, for not being able to take care of her. His years spent in the centre are mixed with remorse for losing her and hope to find her again. He imagines the centre like this, as an apt place for his sister and has plans to bring her back and ensure her education. Thus, his past, present and future ‘selves’ were found to be strongly tied to memories of the lost sibling.

Another boy belonging to a different organization and staying in the centre for almost ten years, narrates his habit of running away from the centre multiple times. He says
that these were his attempts at reuniting with his brother who was his only family on the street. He has difficulty remembering his parents but can recall that his father had been an alcoholic. Immediately after the mother’s death, he and his brother could go anywhere they wanted (“jahan mann kiya jaate the”). This brother was protective of him and ensured his safety on the street. Although he smoked drugs, he never let the participant indulge in it. In every interview, the mention of his brother while discussing life in the open was an indicator of the strong relationship that existed between him and his brother.

For another boy who ran away and lived on the street for six months is now in the centre for the last five years. He narrates how he was the most pampered sibling in the family living in Pune and how much his father loved him. But after the father passed away, he found it difficult to adjust and thus, left the house. But he did express a longing for his elder sister as well, who he very happily recalls, used to love him a lot.

No matter how cordial or disturbed the relationship with the parent was, when discussed about the feeling of security on the street, the need for parents and a family to take care of them, was felt among some boys. The group said “kisi aur ko dekhte hai, papa achcha cheez la ke dete hain, apun ko bhi lagta hai, apun ka papa hota toh...” (when we see some other child getting nice things (to eat) from his parents, we also feel that our parents should have been there.)

They feel the need for their parents now in the centre as well, especially when some festival arrives. They see “building mein rehne waale bachche” (referring to kids who live in houses) get nice things from their parents on these festivals and celebrate with them. This demarcation between the kids staying in the ‘building’ and them shows a strong realization of themselves as kids from ‘outside’ or the ‘street’. This shows their self-identities being associated with the place of living. But before making any conclusion, it needs to be noted that these children have spent 5.27 years in the centre on an average. The socialization in the centre could have had an influence over the identities of the self. More discussion on the influences of their distinct social profiles has been discussed in Chapter 6.
For the participants who are living with their families on the street, have a broad spectrum of emotions towards their family members. The relationships range from denial of the family set up and ‘opting’ for a life without inhibitions; to being part of a close knit family and being economically, socially and emotionally available for each other. For example, a seventeen year old participant living on the street with family considers his parents responsible for holding him back and not supporting his need for education and a bright future. He himself compares his family with another group member X

*iske (X’s) ghar mein maa baap samjhte hain (X’s parents realize the need for education). Aise mein bachche ka bhi mann hota hai ki main aage badun. X ka sahi tareeke se school jana, padhai karna, iska reason hai iske maa baap… Mere ghar mein, agar main kuch cheez maangu bhi toh mili nahi hai. Upar se gaali padhti hai. Toh woh zarurat main khud hi puri kar leta hun.”*

(He compares himself with X and says “In X’s parents understand his needs. This makes the child feel like improving his life. But in my house, I don’t get the things I ask for. On top of that, I am thrashed verbally. So, I try to manage things on my own.)

Another girl with a history of living on the street with family felt dejected in her own house because of her relationship with her mother. This is a girl who is very good in her studies and does her work with equal efficiency. But, the mother was never satisfied. The mother uses abusive words against her and questioned her character often. The mother believed that she is engaging in relationships with boys she studies with. The participant did express that her parents are not her real parents. This condition at home leaves her bereaved and she wanted to have a life of herself without her parents in it. The story about her being exchanged in a police station for another child was told her by her father. As the participant was the only point of contact, it was hard to find out the truth of the story but the way the participant sees it, her mother’s behaviour towards her seem justified only when she chooses to believe that she is not her real mother.

The group of boys, who were more rowdy and boisterous, resisted from talking about their families in a group set up. After much discussion, four of them expressed that they came to the street willingly. The shield of being masculine which is associated strongly with the street behaviour could be one of the reasons holding them back. This transformation from a child from a family to an independent person ‘of the street’ was
understood as an indicator of the effect that the street has had. Also, it talks about the need to be accepted by their peers, which could be achieved by looking as ‘macho’ as they did. They remembered their parents being very forceful and restricting their mobility. They used to ask the boys to do a lot of work they did not want to do, sometimes for money. Boys who were approached in a face to face session opened up more about their backgrounds and it was realized that they might have strong behavioural attributes suggesting their aloofness from their pasts, their hearts still long for their loved ones.

**Reasons for Leaving Home: Across the Fluid Boundaries of ‘in’ and ‘out’**

Combination of a variety of factors become motivation enough for a person in his middle childhood (as the study suggests) to leave home and come to the big city. Atrocities of a step–parent or an abusive alcoholic biological father coupled sometimes with acute poverty, pressure to earn for the family, harsh conditions of work, force the child to leave. This combination of factors, mostly similar, has been observed by Komabarkaran (2004) who conducted a study with the street children of Mumbai.

Relationship with the parents was one such factor. Rizzini and Butler (2003) in order to understand the life trajectories of children on streets, stressed on the disturbed relationships with parents as a catalyst for landing upon the vulnerable spaces of the city. In case of one participant, affair of the divorced/separated father with another woman made him uncomfortable and thus, forced him to stay away from home. The narrow lanes of the city, crowded stations and trains to take fun rides in, became his life. For another participant, death of a loving, caring and affectionate father changed the environment of the house making him feel less desirable in it. Although, openly, he only blamed the household work as the reason for leaving home, similar to another one, who felt that his step mother made him do all the household work. This boy also shared a history of sexual abuse by a family friend but did not directly blame his running away to that particular incident. A major reason for running away from home has been identified as abusive families.
But not all were ready to discuss the past relationships with their parents. For one group consisting of all male participants, who had maintained themselves on the streets without families, felt retrained in talking about their family history in a group situation. This reaction was completely opposite to their usual group behaviour of being rowdy, confident and quick-witted. On being probed repeatedly in group discussion, they only mention that their families used to restrict them from doing what they liked, so they left home. Three of these boys were constantly in touch with their mothers and did mention them when asked about their family. But the group generally blamed the disciplinarian attitude of their parents responsible for their leaving home. This means that the need for freedom around the age of 7 to 10 years, made them take the train ‘away from home’ but not necessarily to the city for all, at least at first. Their hesitation in responding to the issues related to family could be because of a ‘I care a damn’ attitude of these boys. Their behaviour was randy throughout and the friendships and foes shared between each other overpowered their wish or need to vocalize their thoughts about their families. Interestingly, the boys who ended up having in depth interviews with the researcher, told about their families and it was felt that they both missed the care and affection of their family members. This strong exterior which boys on the streets portray can be a seen as a sign of ‘masculinity’ strongly appreciated and sought after by boys on the streets.

The case was different for the other group of nine boys who also, had survived on the streets without families. This group, unlike the other, told in length about their family and native towns and villages. The memories of playing in the village with friends, the experience of trying out a bidi (smoked tobacco) and being caught by the parent, the memory of liking a girl in the village school and even the harsh realities at home, mainly the poverty stricken lifestyle and responsibility shared for the economic sustenance of the family at a young age; were all shared at length.

Some of those who mentioned parents, remembered them being unfair but interestingly, they did not state that as the main reason for leaving, at least initially in the discussions. It was realized that the parent’s attitude was an ongoing factor making a situation generally difficult. But leaving home was an impulsive decision, usually taking place after appearance of a crises situation, which might not have
anything to do with the parent directly. For example, one boy left because he said “school nahi jana tha mere ko” (I did not want to go to school.). Although he was a victim of sexual abuse by a neighbour and had a step mother who was physically and verbally abusive towards him, he did not mention that as the reason for leaving. Similarly, another boy who, it would seem, flee because of the death of the father, rather said, that he left because siblings use to make him fetch water from the village well. This sort of perceived understanding can be seen in context with Kombarkaran’s (2004) classification of reasons for leaving home as “long-lasting stressful conditions” and “acutely stressful events”.

The need for independence and freedom has been stated by Nye (1980) and Rizzini and Butler (2003) as one of the factors that could lead a child to run away from home. Nye called them perceived ‘rewards’ for leaving home. Some participants clearly considered the lack of freedom and independence missing in their homes, the reason for leaving. Some retrospectively look at leaving home as a childish mistake they regret, for a few others, it was the economic hardships faced also forced some to head towards the big city. A few said about their parents “Maa baap ki sunn sunn ke pakk gaye the” (we were tired of listening to them).

Actually, the more one dwells into the lives of these individuals, the more difficult it becomes to settle on any one reason. Some of them said that they liked trains (as proved by a census by TISS - Action Aid 2013) and wanted to experience a ride and as they were young, they lost track of where the train would take them and thus, landed up in Mumbai. For some, it was just a habit to run away. Although, it was later felt that other than the ‘habit’, there were other factors which could be interpreted as factors, triggering their escape from the stressful home conditions.

Poverty affected them and their household in multiple ways. One was sent by his parents to earn a living and thus making poverty a reason for attraction towards the city. For another, economic hardships and an alcoholic father had forced him to work in a factory for ten hours, seven days a week, for a daily payment of Rs 30. When he realized that he cannot bear it any more, he took the first train and landed up in Mumbai. For him, taking the train was escaping an extremely stressful situation. As
already stated, these situations ranged from having to do household work to attempts of sexual abuse. For one participant, Mumbai was a well thought out option by his parents to make him have a ‘big city education’. But, the Uncle with whom he was residing sexually abused his sister which made both the siblings to run away and get lost in the city. An abusive and dysfunctional family, sometimes affected with poverty has been cited by many studies as a reason to run away from home (Kauffman and Widom 1999; Schimmel 2008; Tyler et al. 2011).

For a few others, this exposure to the city all alone was completely involuntary. One participant shared how he, as a young child of around 4-5 years of age, left her mother’s hand in a crowded station in Mumbai. Since that day, he has never seen his mother, although has made many attempts to search for her mother. Sadly, he says, he does not even remember her face. For many others, attraction towards the feeling of freedom and independence pulled them towards a life in Mumbai.

It is worth noticing that none of the participants stated the attraction for ‘Mumbai’ per say, as a reason to leave their homes. They say that they were too young when the move from the village to the city happened. The attitude with almost every child was to take the first train that stops at the platform. Some of their luck brought them to Mumbai. As they grew up, they were attracted by ‘Mumbai’. Thus, some of the participants have been to a lot of cities in the country and then finally settled in Mumbai.

To earn a living and sustain them economically is the most prominent reason for families to migrate from different parts of the country to Mumbai. It usually starts with the bread winner of the families who creates a space on the streets/pavements of the city, where the whole family shifts eventually. Children migrated with them and male children gradually became breadwinners for the family. Eight girls had lived with their families on the street. Two girls had survived the street only with their mothers. Both have estranged fathers who abandoned them and thus, the mothers had to make a living for themselves. After a short while, one found a temporary shelter to live in and the other admitted her daughter to the Centre’s night shelter. This girl, during the meetings, described the social consequences of a rape attempt on her which
made her mother leave the village. The stigma attached with a young girl became too much to bear for this girl who was ten years old then, and her single mother and that brought them to Mumbai.

Two girls have lived on the street without families. Both of these are seventeen years old, who ran away from home. The reason for one was her siblings’ verbal and physical abuse amongst each other, the other left home because of differences with the step mother, husband and mother in law. None of the two have spent more than ten to fifteen days at the ‘station’ when the centre’s social worker brought them to the shelter. The reasons stated by both were the stressful environment of the family and no acute crises was mentioned as the immediate event which led to their escape.

**Exposure to the Street vs. Exposure to Centre**

The method of working of each organization could also be said to have a relationship with participants’ attitudes and behaviours in the focused group meetings as well as their recollection of experiences on the streets. One factor influencing ‘self’ of the adolescents internally and externally could be the exposure of life ‘outside’. For example, the behaviour of boys of Centre B and C, i.e, those living on street without families, were starkly different each other. If on one hand, the boys of the Centre B, were sincere and disciplined, approving the ways of the centre’s functioning; the participants of Centre C were boisterous, quick witted and critical of the systems and people around them. It is necessary to point out here that the difference could be because admissions of most of the boys in Centre B were initially voluntary whereas, in Centre C, majority of the boys were ordered to stay in the centre as per the CWCs. Most of the boys had been away from the ‘streets’ for at least three months, ranging to as much as eight years. Whereas, in Centre C, the contact with the streets was quite regular, thus keeping them closer to their pasts. Thus, a description of the time spent in the centre and the streets has been described, for those living with and without families, to reach an understanding of their negotiating identities and present and future selves.
(a) **Adolescents on the street without the family.** The initial friction in adjusting to the life in the centre has been mentioned by many. Still, based on the responses, the time spent on the streets needs to be looked at, in comparison with the time spent in the centre. This temporal characteristic could be an indicator in understanding their adjustments with the selves in varied environmental situations. For twenty three participants (eighteen boys and five girls), first contact made with the organization was 9.6 years ago. The average time spent by these participants (on the street without families) was 5.2 years before coming in contact with the organizations. Again, it needs to be noted here that this shift was not a onetime event. There was a transition happening between the street and the centre except three boys who had no contact with the street since they moved to the centre.

Another finding was that most of the participants did not make an attempt to go back to their native towns to unite back with their families. The reasons were mostly a hazy memory of home, along with geographical as well as emotional factors. For example, the boys who had left home due to the lack of freedom at home and verbal and physical abuse by parents, did not want to go back, even though, they do miss the love and warmth of their parents. One of them puts his feelings about this ongoing transition as follows:

> Main yahan khush hun. Padh raha hun...ghar jaunga toh mujhe pata hai... unke paas itna (paisa) nahi hai ki mujhe padha payein. Lekin mujhe aise mann karta hai ki main jaun, unh ek baar achche se dekh bhi lun aur unhein pata bhi nahe chale. Woh mujhe nahi dekh sake.

(I am happy here in the centre. I am studying. At home, they do not have the money to support my education. But I sometimes feel that I should go and see them. They should not know that I have come but I want to have a look of them.)

(b) **Adolescents on the street with the family.** For those living with families, the exposure to street and the centre is slightly different from those who have had a life completely devoid of adult authority outside. At home, studying is very difficult and thus, they like coming to the centre. The friend circle here is the social life they have. Most importantly, they get to eat here, at least once a day which they feel would not have been possible outside. They do not mention freedom and independence as the overarching feelings of being on the street, like their counterparts living without
families. For them, relationship with the family members occupies a lot of their understanding of the streets and its influences.

CONCLUSION

These background characteristics associated with each individual, decides to a large extent, the adjustment on the street and their sense of selves. The description of the life on the streets, before and after has been expressed in detail during FGDs. The findings from those discussions have been analysed in the next chapter, understanding these differences putting social profiles in a context.