

# play

magazine

## RIGHTS

# ACCESS TO PLAY IN CRISIS

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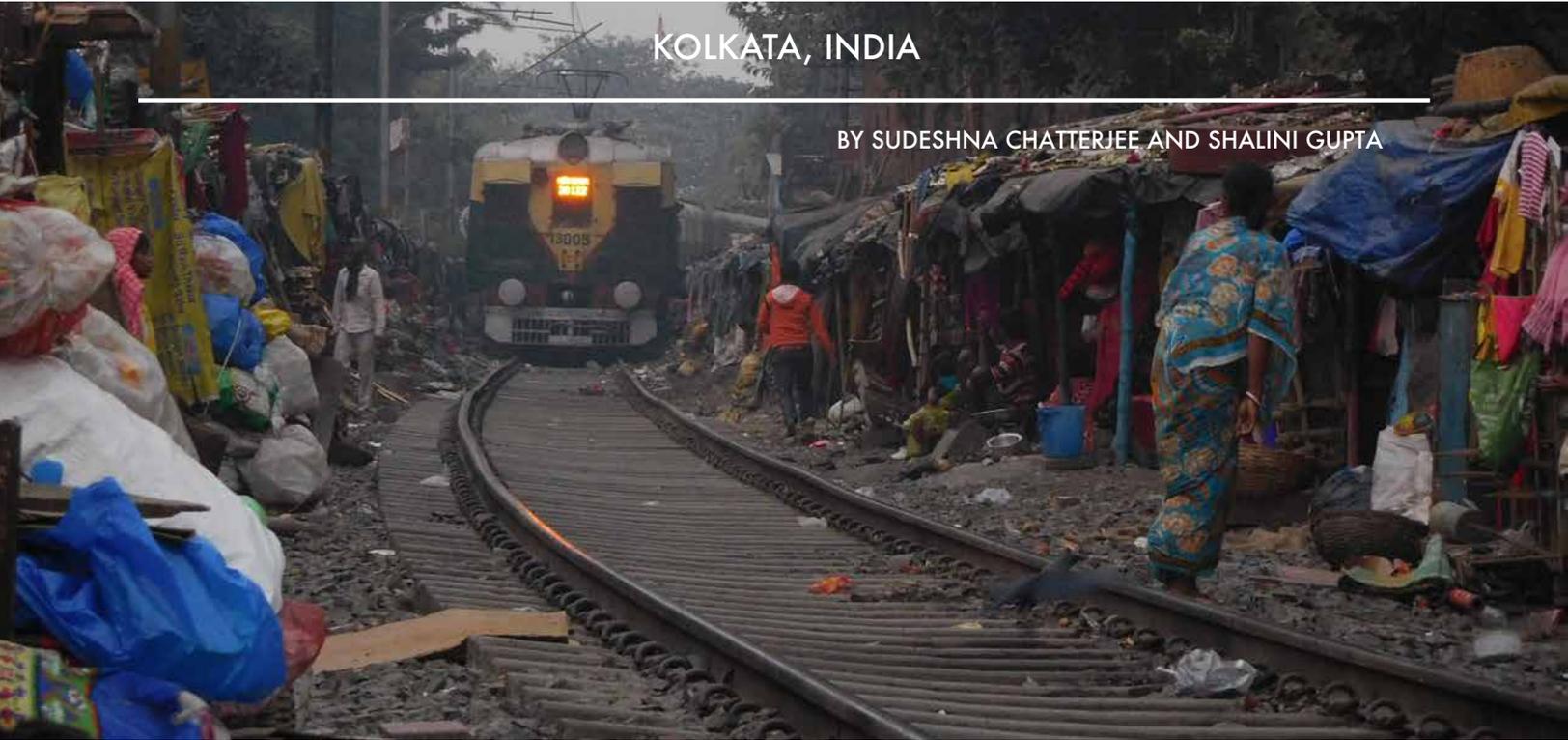
Urban Life for Roma  
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# Access to Play in Crisis Research

KOLKATA, INDIA

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## The Context:

A railway track curves its way through a settlement of crude huts made from salvaged rubbish. The huts are barely three feet away from the track on either side. About 26 trains run on this single track in both directions between 8:00 and 21:00 hours everyday. An air horn is blown to signal the arrival of a train, but it does not indicate the direction of an incoming train and nor is this audible signal sounded without fail every time. To make things worse, a bend to the north of the track along the squatters makes the train invisible till it suddenly appears.

People sit in front of their huts and carry out the business of living from cooking and studying to socializing and fighting. Small children play in front of the huts or on the track between trains as they are not allowed to go far, parents feel children are safer playing near home than beyond where they cannot keep an eye on them. In fact, parents start acclimatizing their children to the harsh environment from a young age; infants are laid down with their heads on the track to feel the vibration of train movements so that they know in their blood when to get out of harm's way.

This is the Nimtola Ghat squatter settlement in Kolkata, India where the Access to Play in Crisis research was conducted with

18 girls and 22 boys (all between 6 and 14 years of age). All the participants lived in the squatters along the railway tracks. Out of the 40 children, 32 attended school. The study took place over the winter months from December 2016 to February 2017. Six researchers from two different local organizations, Earth Care and Jhalapala, engaged with children in their everyday settings, observing them at play, going on child-led walks and finally conducting workshops with the children using the child friendly tools specially designed for this project to understand how children cope and make sense of the world through play.

Nimtola Ghat squatter residents live in an extremely hazardous environment without any security of tenure and in abject poverty. Deemed illegal, the present population are the third or fourth generation descendants of migrants who came to Kolkata, the most important city in eastern India, in search of work from the neighbouring states of Bihar and Jharkhand. Adult males work as cleaners, porters or cycle van drivers and females work as domestic help in nearby neighbourhoods. Slums are the de facto housing for the poor in Kolkata, however migrants who came to the city earlier, live in legally recognized settlements whereas the later migrants, who came during the 1970s or later, live in illegal squatter settlements that mushroomed on vacant land in the margins of

city infrastructure along the railway tracks, canals etc. With the extreme pressure on land and municipal services, these squatter settlements are unlikely to be regularized by the city corporation. Some families have the financial means to move to a proper room in a regularized slum with municipal services. Yet they continue to stay in the squatters mainly because living here is free and the area of work is right next to the settlement. More importantly as most of the families belong to the lower castes, mainly “Doms”, the caste that attend to funeral duties and are typically treated as untouchables by higher caste Hindus, the families in Nimtola Ghat stayed put here to be among the same caste and not risk discrimination and prejudice in regularized slums which will have a greater mix of people from different backgrounds.

According to Census of India, 2011, total number of slums in Kolkata city is 300,755 with a population of 1,409,721, which is about 31.35% of Kolkata’s population. Though not all slums are the same, the scale of everyday crisis in illegal (unregularized) slums across India, puts over a million children at risk everyday from hazardous living conditions. The many deprivations these children face, and the lack of opportunities for education or skill development, make it especially hard for them to break the cycle of poverty in their lifetime, which further entrenches and even exacerbates inequality in society.

**Crematorium and the surrounding area:** Nimtala Ghat is a famous crematorium next to the squatters and the area gets its name from it. Many people in the area are connected to the various industries that service the crematorium and the Hindu rituals associated with death. This area has century old temples and ghats (a wide set of steps descending to a river for bathing and worship), warehouses, launch jetty, residential buildings, small scale industries and a railway track for Kolkata’s circular railway that encircles the city and serves the suburbs. The crematorium is located on the river bank abutting the Strand Road which separates the squatters from the river bank. On an average, 70 - 80 dead bodies are cremated here daily, mostly using electric incinerators but some still use conventional, open pyre funerals burning wood. The chimneys of the crematorium belt out smoke as do nearby factories and cars (exhaust gas) in the busy roads of the area. Extreme air pollution is an everyday reality.

**The river:** The Hooghly River, which is a tributary of the mighty Ganges, flows through Kolkata before entering its estuary in Bay of Bengal. The residents consider the river to be dangerous because of the tidal bore that make the water level unpredictable and the river turbulent. A tidal bore is a strong tide that pushes up the river, against the current generating a strong surge which temporarily makes the river deeper.

Two children died during such a tidal surge last monsoon. There are 40 ghats along the river where daily bathing, washing, death rituals, idol immersion and other activities take place which further pollute an already polluted river from industrial waste upstream. The everyday rituals generate a lot of flowers, fruits and other waste which are discarded in the river as a holy practice. There is death along and on the river; the children of this area have reported seeing dead bodies and carcasses of dead animals floating on the water and the fire at the wooden pyres at Nimtala Ghat never dies just as the smell of ghee and burning flesh hang thick in the air. The male relatives of the bereaved shave their heads at the ghat and immerse the ashes of the loved ones in the water. Yet there is life along and on the river as the riverbank and the river are possibly the only large open spaces available to children for play.

### **Right to play**

The findings of the study show that the children have almost no access to formal open spaces for play. Children greatly desired to play in the clean and decorated open space around the memorial of Rabindranath Tagore (poet and Nobel laureate) inside the crematorium but they are denied permission to do so by the guard. Children have no option but to seek out any and every available space irrespective of the risks they present. Most frequented play areas are the banks of the river by both boys and girls and the river itself for boys; the road between the railway track and the river bank; and on or along the railway tracks.

With little or no intervention from adults (especially for boys), children in this study were found to be in control of the time and space for play. As children have very few commercial toys, they exhibited enormous creativity in devising games using available resources, mostly manipulating loose parts to create play objects. The children are very resilient and innovative in structuring their play often strategizing resource collection and manufacturing complex items for satisfying their play needs, demonstrating the idea that ‘everything makes a play object’.

### **Types of Play in Crisis**

#### **Games on the river bank:**

Boys play Lattu or spinning the top. This game is played individually by most children. However, a variation of it, Guch Maramari, is played in groups as a competition game where a circle is drawn on the ground with all participants’ tops in it and one by one each child has to throw their tops with the aim of breaking the other tops. This is a rough game played aggressively with tops but without harming each other.

Play is gendered. Only a few types of play such as sculpting with mud, playing with pet animals, playing Bagbandi (a two-player strategy board game involving a tiger hunt) are played by both boys and girls. Girls mostly engage in pretend play, imaginative and role play, like, Biye Shadi (marriage game) and Pujo Pujo (Hindu ritualistic worship game). Biye Shadi, is a game where the migrant Bihari girls enact lengthy marriage ceremonies while singing traditional wedding songs; they play the part of both the bride (younger and shorter girls) and the groom (older girls). The researchers were amazed to see how the girls knew every little nuance of the Hindu marriage ritual which they no doubt have seen countless times in the many temples in the local area. The girls' marriage play imitated life in the greatest possible detail and the secluded women's portion of the bank had ample loose parts for them to use such as flowers, garlands, rice grains, bangles, paper etc. that had been discarded after rituals on the banks. Pujo Pujo is another game where the girls enact Hindu worshipping rituals using salvaged materials from the river: flowers, garlands, fruits etc. Both Hindu and Muslim girls pray to Lord Shiva through play worship imploring him to give them a good husband. Girls also collect mud from the river and make henna like tattoos on their hands. Cooking, both real as part of their chores at home and imaginary in public places is another activity that is popular among the girls of all ages. There is little difference in the processes in pretend cooking and real cooking as the same utensils are used for both and same procedures followed except in real cooking precious edible ingredients are used. Teen mothers are also seen to join in imaginary play along with their infants making pretend food with their unmarried friends or making garlands and playing worship games with younger girls. These same garlands may even be sold on the street later. The boundaries of work and play, real and imaginary worlds fluidly overlap.

#### **Games on the river:**

Floating on the river, in a handmade raft (called 'trawler' by children) is a game played by boys aged 7-14 years, sometimes joined by girls. This is by far the most ingenious and risky game the children play. The children make the rafts themselves from found loose parts, mainly plastic mats and thermocol (Styrofoam) pieces. Once made, they take these rafts to the middle of the wide river during day time and sometimes after sunset. They do not use any safety gear, but they seem to be well aware of the tide timings when the river swells up. They shared that they only fear the river dolphins who sometimes overturn the rafts.

The river is a major resource for children for collecting mud, salvaging loose parts such as styrofoam pieces, clay idols, coins, fruits and flowers among other things.

#### **Games on the Railway Track:**

Usually younger children till 5 years play on the tracks, as parents find it easier to supervise and keep an eye on them. Boys play balancing on tracks or pulling carts while the girls play with dolls or pretend cook with stones and leaves. Other games are tent making and badminton using plastic table tennis bats. Children as they grow older move to the river bank to play away from adult supervision.

#### **Games on the road:**

Games played by children on the roads are spinning tops, cycling, skipping, bagbandi, dragging, pushing and riding self-made wheeled toys and exploring all possible sources for procuring loose parts including garbage vats.

#### **Adaptation and resilience through play in crisis**

Growing up in a risky and hazardous environment, children demonstrated an ability to adapt to the conditions in several ways: using the affordances offered by the assemblage of different places in their local area comprising the river, the banks, the track, the roads, the crematorium, other public places; resourcing loose parts from the local environment; constructing play props and devising games using loose parts and imagination. For example, playing Bagbandi with coloured bottle caps instead of conventional pieces and by drawing the grid of the game board on the flat surface of the river bank, or making cards with match boxes, or playing with salvaged fruits and flowers in the worship play, or constructing floating devises of every scale for the river, or making tents on the tracks between trains or play acting gods and goddesses with idol parts washed ashore by the river.

The process of making the trawler, is a great example of innovation and resilience of children. All the materials were collected by children from neighbouring localities through careful planning. The plastic mats on which dead bodies are laid on the floor for rituals before cremation and discarded afterwards were collected in the early evening before the adults came in to salvage the wooden cots under the mats. Children go to two fish markets located in Baghbazar and Howrah, about 1-2 km away, early in the morning twice a week to collect the thermocol, discarded by the fish mongers after they unpack the fish for sale. The children then sew up the mat to form a pouch into which they fill the thermocol pieces, to finish their 'trawler'. They first do a test run along the banks and on satisfactory completion of the same they take it to the middle of the river.

#### **Time:**

Children have ample time to play as education is not a priority. But, gender plays a vital role in determining the type and time of play. After the age of 8 years, the girls and the boys usually do not

play together. Housework reduces the time of free play for girls and they are allowed to play only after they finish all household chores. Boys also by the age of 14 years, start helping their fathers or brothers at work, which reduces their time to play. Children are often seen to combine work and play, for example, girls (between 8 and 14 years of age) engage in extensive role play, while washing clothes or utensils on the river bank. Even younger children, who are not let out of sight of the parents, start playing with the food that is given to them, sitting on the railway tracks.

#### Permission:

There is no awareness about right to play of children in the larger society as is evident from the lack of designated play spaces or play programs within wider community development initiatives of different organizations. Parents neither encourage nor discourage children to play. However, there are examples that show adult support for play: a father made his daughter a temple structure to play Pujo Pujo with her friends. Younger children (3-6 years) are permitted to play only along the railway track as it is easier for parents to keep an eye on them from the shacks. The indirect surveillance of adults while children played on the river was observed when a young girl who had jumped into a raft with two other boys was immediately brought ashore by an adult male who quickly waded to the raft to pull her out. The community keeps strict vigilance to protect the girls from going too far into the river. The river banks are out of bounds for younger children after sunset. This is because as evening falls, many adults, mostly men, engage in illegal gambling, drug peddling and drug use on the banks. Country liquor, weed, hash, bhong etc. are easily available near the river and many adolescent boys also like to seek the anonymity and privacy of the river bank after dark to do drugs. The children disperse to the other nearby banks, seek out other safer places and continue to play. Sometimes, after dark, children crowd inside tea stalls to watch TV if it is available.

As the fieldwork happened over three winter months, the seasonal variation of play could not be documented. For example, during the religious festivals, the nature of play changes to activities like 'shoe keeping,' supplying match sticks and candles for lighting incense sticks etc, which merges the realms of play

and work just as it does when children play with clothes and utensils on the riverbank while washing them.

The Access to Play in Crisis research in Nimtola Ghat provides a counter narrative to the dominant ones which are framed around categorizing these children as street children, as partially socialized as they live outside the regulatory spheres of the family (stable home-based) and the school and are widely perceived to engage in loitering and vagrancy. In an environment of high poverty, alcohol and substance abuse, the children also face increased risk of violence at home and in public places. They are often beaten at home and have seen adults abusing and fighting with each other which sometimes translates to violence on them. Most children here are first generation school-goers with very high school drop-out rates around the ages 10-14 years. Girls get involved in child rearing and domestic chores at home, while boys even before dropping out from school start helping their fathers or relatives in their work. Early engagement of children in labour means missing out on the chance to be educated and getting a healthy start in life. All this is probably true for most children living here. However, these children do not perceive themselves as victims. And they are not, at least not the passive kind.

In Nimtola Ghat children and young people live in a context of limited regulations and adult supervision, almost no access to formal play spaces or commercial games and toys. Consequently, they can be seen to be the most active users of every conceivable and accessible public space, loitering, sitting, working, sleeping, studying and playing. The immense richness of their play, spanning across many play types, seems to suggest that these street children despite contrary dominant narratives enjoy a form of childhood that is privileged with spontaneity, creativity, play, freedom of movement and emotional expressions. The very qualities that we seek to recover or reinstate when we lament the loss of childhood in the modern consumerist society. What emerges from the myriad forms of culturally embedded, self-structured and self-organized deep play of children as witnessed in Nimtola Ghat, is an image of children as resilient social actors whose spontaneous and creative activities outdoors expands the vision of risks and social possibilities of play itself.

#### Researchers and professional volunteers supporting the research

##### Senior Researchers:

- Santanil Ganguly (Jhalapala)
- Ashish Das (Earth Care)

##### Research Team:

- Srinjoy Das (Earthcare)
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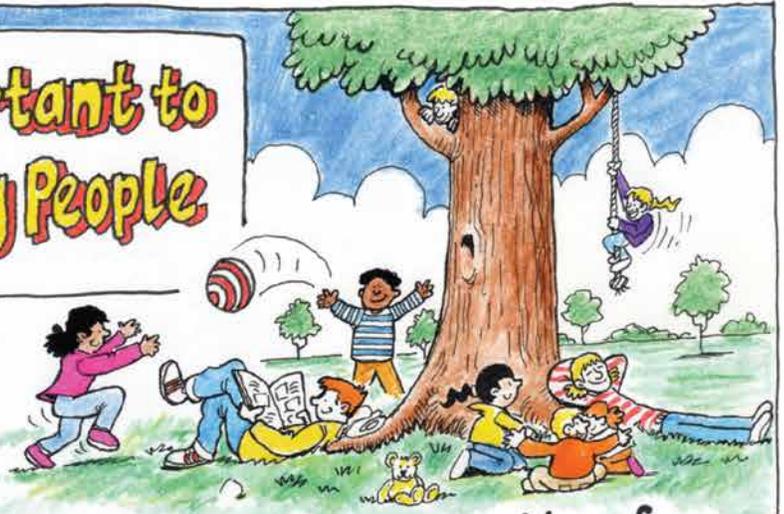
#### Professional Volunteers (support in map making, urban situation analysis, writing draft reports)

- Sonia Guha (Urban Designer)
- Debarati Chakraborty (Urban Designer)

#### Research monitoring, editing and writing final report

- Shalini Gupta (Action for Children's Environments)
- Subrata Ghosh (Action for Children's Environments)

# Article 31 is important to Children and Young People



● We must have space and time for play, recreation and relaxing

● Playing helps us stay safe healthy and happy



● Governments MUST find ways to get rid of the things that get in the way of time for play



● We must have opportunities to explore and understand our own culture

● We should be involved in cultural and artistic activities and be able to go to places like museums, festivals, theatres, concerts and libraries

● Governments must make sure that none of us are left out



● If Governments take all of this seriously, our lives will be happier and healthier

# iipa

Promoting the Child's right to play

