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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT ON THE MEANING, STRATEGIES, AND DIMENSIONS OF STREET VENDING IN AN URBAN SETTING OF KOLKATA, WEST BENGAL.

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### Abstract

In most of the third world countries like the Indian cities, informal economic livelihood activities have grown immensely over the past decade due to lack of employment opportunities in formal sectors of the urban areas in the spaces like-Kolkata, West Bengal. Specifically the urban 'poor' through such activities have gained employment and provide low cost services to a large section of the middle class residents of the area under study.

Several studies have already shown that street vendors are one of the most 'marginalised' and 'vulnerable' sections of the urban and sub-urban Indian context. To perceive the meaning, strategies, livelihood, and other dimensions of this sector, the present authors purposively selects "street vendors" including both perishable and non-perishable commodity sellers of the area under present research.

The mode and approach of one year long research is grounded on the ethnographic approach and methods from designing, framing, collection of data, triangulation, transcription, data analysis and interpretation of the findings. The data were collected through semi structured and in-depth interviews and intensive case studies.

The current effort reflects a detailed understanding of the processes and networking of informal sector that could provide an open scope for future research and innovative regulatory programmes, rather than opposing the informal workers, in part of the Government, initiatives should take into consideration in the process of implementing policies for the hawkers. The reflection of the present and in-depth ethnographic study represents a particular section of informal earning groups, but the present authors expects the research as a case and instance for better policy and actions of the area under study.

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### Introduction:-

Street vending or selling goods, commodities, and services in the public space is one of the most common, accessible, and momentous occupational categories in the context of globalized informal economy, extending its

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horizons in the developing countries due to limited scope of employment in the 'organized' and/or 'formal' sectors; concurrently stimulates the opportunities among the academicians, researchers, socio-developmental activists, administrative personnel, and policy makers for conducting in-depth and effective researches in the domain of informal sectors (Vargas and Urinboyev, 2015; Saha, 2011; Timalisina, 2011; ILO, 2004). The concept of informal sector was first introduced by Hart in 1971 (Bekkers and Stoffers, 1995), but the essence of the field is embedded with the earlier impression of 'unorganised sector' that indicates 'small' size production units (Kabra, 1995). The 'unorganised' and 'domestic' nature of informal economy may also be a part of 'non-monetary' sector (GOI, 1951). Kabra (1995) indicates that the terminological diversities (including the term-'survival sector', 'non-structured sector', 'transitional activities' and so on) and debates to contextualise and localise the practices of informal economy in classical and contemporary researches, reflects the dynamic and complex nature of the issues concerned. Thus came, the priorities, angles and frames of research in informal economic practices are multilayered and manifold, is undergoing through major shifts and changes in its discussion and interpretation of living in informal mode of economy as a phenomenon, types of labour employed, productivity and contribution of the agencies associated to Gross Domestic Product, and the issues of policy intervention (Williams and Tumusiime-Mutebile, 1978; Tokman, 1990; ILO, 1972; Kabra, 1995; Charmes, 1990; Arye, 1981; Bromley, 1978).

Street vending as a significant manifestation of informal economy varies in terms of scale, timing, location, remuneration, workforce, types of goods sold and services provided, and it can be a full-time occupation, a part-time occupation, seasonal, and/or occasional dealings (Rosales, 2013; Bhowmik, 2005). The process of 'global-restructuring' instigates, accelerates, and expands the scope for individuals to incline towards street vending as a profession to serve the specialized classes in the global cities (DeLuca, 2012; Stoller, 2002). The profession of street vending can be carried out by one person but can also be a franchise of a larger street business. It can be a survival strategy or part of a big business. The incomes of street vendors consequently vary widely (Ray and Mishra, 2011).

In urban India, street vending is the largest informal sector serving mainly the 'urban poor' faces great difficulties and challenges since the era of 'economic reform' in this country (Srivastava et al. 2012; Ray and Mishra, 2011). The 'old Indian cities' are going through the rapid pace of globalization and urbanization that promotes the restructuring of the cities with different developmental strategies, including the formation of new markets, but, these reforming strategies does not effectively attempts to develop the 'old' markets, and/or rarely implements any strategy related to the alternative space for the street vendors, even in the context of a rapid increasing of participation in street vending among the immigrant population (Avigna AS, 2010). Moreover, because they sell cheaper products, the street vendors often cater for the urban poor (Ray and Mishra, 2011). There are no labour standards at the international level dealing directly with street vendors. The manner in which street vending is approached at the domestic level varies dramatically from one country to another. Many countries specifically regulate this activity, providing a clear legal framework and jurisdictional mandates, while others have an overlapping jurisdictional mandate, which creates confusion and conflict, and in others still, street hawking is simply considered illegal (Ray and Mishra, 2011).

### **The Objectives:-**

The Present study is set to explore-

- a) The perception and lived experiences of hawking and street vending and the crisis associated with the profession from an insider's perspective.
- b) The meaning, strategies and other related dimensions of street vending to find out the meaningful alternatives for better policy and action.

### **Methodology:-**

The current study has been conducted in the Sealdah region of Kolkata, West Bengal. The area has been selected for study due to three major reasons- i) the area is surrounded by almost two hundred (200) hawkers and multiple kinds of perishable and non perishable commodities; ii) the consumers are frequent to the region and they are from both urban and suburban premises of the state, and iii) the authors are well aware of the concerned market place and their communication with the principal agency (the hawkers) of the research were convenient to the area.

Fifty (50) respondents were selected through a primary informative schedule that included name, age, sex, the migratory information, location of the stall, selling time and duration, types of items or commodities, and perception about target consumers. After having the baseline data from the schedule, the researchers have gone through the data minutely and prioritized twenty five (25) respondents for depth interviews.

The core nature of the research is inclined to ethnographic approach and methods. The data related to the issues of socio-economic details, the process of vending, interactive pattern with the consumers, the crisis of the profession, emotional orientations towards the space, the maintenance of the local network, and the broker and mediator issues have been collected by using semi-structured and depth interviews. Field notes were collected during and after the fieldwork that facilitated data analysis and to endorse meaningful insights to the findings.

The collected data have been transcribed verbatim to include the insider's perspective of the issues concerned. After the phase of transcription, the data have been sorted out and significant findings have been marked to proceed the data to the next stage of analysis. The primary data have been analyzed by using narrative data analysis method. After analysing the data, the findings were contextualised with the research frame and question, and interpreted accordingly.

## **The Findings:-**

### **A) "Street Vending"- getting into the Profession:-**

The degree of choices of the participants to the street vending as profession varies from independent selection to situational inconveniences. Smt. Pratima Basak has opined that- *after my husband's sudden death there was a single option left to me i.e. to continue my husband's occupation...before his death I was a house-wife and we have no child...at the very outset the profession seemed to me very difficult...I had no idea how to manage the consumers....but gradually things became habituated...one of his friends (is a fruit seller like my husband) helped me a lot....now I can estimate who will buy and who not...how to behave with a regular customer and how to handle those who is just bargaining.*

Mr. Bhola Baidya (a vegetable seller) chose his profession independently. He is from a family who depends on cultivation as their main earning source. He opined that- *I have chosen the profession independently...we have our own land for cultivation....at first I used to sell vegetables at my local area...I am here for last six years...the consumers here are of different kinds-some are almost regular and known to me very well who buy on the way return from their offices...sometimes they ordered many vegetables which I am not used to sell...but I bring that for them...after all they are my fixed customers...*

### **B) Communicating with the Consumers and dealing with the Chaos:-**

Street market gives a larger section of the urban people specially the middle class fresh products and traditional food in relatively lower price in compare to the super markets or malls. As a profession street vending always needs several strategies to gain profit in such a congested crowded place competing with others by sensing consumer's mentality from their choices and preferences of items and sometimes influences the shopping behaviour of the customers. Md. Sipahi, aged 40 years, fruit seller in the road side stated- *I have some fixed customers who visited everyday evening while returning from office.... I generally prefer to make them wait for few minutes if there is rush... I sell them fresh fruits in low rate... even I sense the mentality of a unknown customer by seeing his/her face that whether he/she came to buy or just to check and compare rates with other shops. Sometimes they also give intra-personal signals to their known customers in presence of others to not to take fruits or vegetables if they are not in good condition but they sell them with smiling face to others. To earn profit I need to sell fruits in higher rates and even the rotten ones from unsold stock of previous day to unknown customers... ummm... if my fixed customers are there at that time I just simply "blinking my eye" to signal them to keep quiet and wait....soon after the customer left off I come out with fresh fruits to the known ones....sometimes I also give credit if the wont have change – as said by another fruit seller Mr. Sambhunath Saha.*

### **C) The Problems, Crisis, and the Major Challenges of Street Vending:-**

A number of daily felt problems were reported by the hawkers which are presented here categorically -

#### **i) Lack of Drinking water and Toilet facilities:-**

The place is devoid of facilities like drinking water as well as toilets. To respond to the nature's call they even have to walk for more than five minutes. In voice of Gorabini Seal (50yrs), 'vegetable seller' - *there is neither toilet nearby nor any drinking water...we have to walk to either Sealdha station or to Shradhananda Park... According to Nirapada Bhounik, a 'readymade garment seller', 50 yrs old - the principal trouble is felt by all hawkers that only toilet is there at Sradhananda Park...a walking distance of five minutes from hawking spot...which is not convenient when there is a pressure of customers.*

**ii) Threats and Troubles from the Local Mediators/Brokers:-**

In response to the commonly felt need to organize them from within, initiatives were taken long time back in the 70s and soon after it was termed as 'Kolkata Street Hawkers Union', affiliated to a political party. But problems arose when it comes to the issue of money lending and the lenders were the local political party leaders as well as the members of the union. Mr. Dharmendar Prasad, a 40 yrs middle aged 'jhal-mudi-wala' stated that - *problem is mainly financial...there is no saving, but the family is large...if any member of the family is sick then we have to borrow the money from our union leaders...the amount of interest is 10% monthly which is quite high for me...due to the fear of losing selling-space, we become silent....our struggle for social security purposes.* Mr. Mujafar Khan (54 yrs old), a 'vegetable seller' for the last 25 years, stated that - *the rate of interest for hawkers like us (perishable commodities) is much higher than other kind of hawkers of these place...even 20% per month...* As they are not recognized formally by the Government so they have no other alternatives but to borrow money from these private money lenders at a very high rate of interest which varies depends on their selling commodities.

**iii) The Crisis and troubles associated with the Space:-**

Very common problems faced by most of the hawkers are space they occupied for selling their commodities. The local union fixed 5'x3' for every hawker but sometimes it become 3'x3'. According to Mr. Chandan Mallik, who is regular in this place as 'sandal wood- rudraksha seller' for last 30 yrs stated that - *the space demarked by the union is not equal for all...in most cases, they are allotted accordance to personal choices of the union leaders...it is problematic for me to display all variety of items within this little place of merely 3'x3'.* In addition to that, according to Mr. Tapan Seal, 'cup-dish seller'...*we are always in a fear that if any day I will absent due to any reason, I may lose my selling place, there is always an additional pressure of some other hawkers who have no fixed place allotted by the local union.* Usually they occupy the space when a union recognized hawker is absent.

**iv) Scarcity of Storage:-**

There is no arrangement of preservation of fruits or vegetables, so unsold items become rotten, for which the prices are fixed after taking into consideration of all cost. According to 55 yrs old 'fruit seller' Mr. Swapan Roy - *I can't sell all the fruits which I purchase daily...I have to sell 3 kgs of mangoes at the price equal to the price of 5 kgs of mangoes...in this way I try to raise the purchasing price...if all fruits are not selling out daily...it is hard to earn profit.* Mr. Sadanada Sil (43 yrs of age), a regular 'vegetable seller' opined that - *the major problems for perishable commodity sellers like us is the absentee of storage room...apart from the burden of not sold vegetables storage...we also faced seasonal problems like coping with rain.*

**v) Lack of Organized policies and Schemes:-**

As there is no as such particular policy or scheme for legalising street vending in almost all cities of our country, corruption, in the form of bribery and extortion from all possible means as well as from police, eats the earnings of these people and reduces their income further. Mr. Krishna Das, a boot polisher was there for almost long 40 yrs said- *well my equipment values a small amount of Rs. 500/ but for doing business even in this foot path with this little amount I need to pay bribe to the local political leaders to sustain here... even police also did the same.... I won't tell you the amount... we all (indicating other vendors) are living in anxiety and struggling for long.* If Government will take initiatives then this gives a lever to the municipal authorities to earn more through license fees and street vending can also be regulated.

**The Interpretation of the Findings: A Brief Overview:-**

Each state government may have own planning and policies for development of its undertaken cities like- allocating space for hospitals, parks, markets, bus and rail terminuses etc. The present study intends to mirror that instead of implementing any comprehensive plans, they could take into account the alternative livelihood for hawkers for the successful and actual development of the city.

The present research are purposively restricted to portray in street vending to unearth a detailed account on the life, living and crises of the concerned respondents in the studied area. The qualitative parameters and themes developed on the basis of the narrative data analysis method from the findings of the study clearly suggests the perception, living the profession, the crises of the profession, and an hazardous and/or hectic situations to sustain the profession for a long period of time.

The present authors through their analytical findings with a very brief interpretation further instigates to intensive future and detailed research and recommendations to the governmental and other non-governmental agencies to

avoid these limitations on the multiple and different informal market oriented spaces and settings of the concerned city, as well as on the other cities in India for the issues of wellbeing and sustainable living of informal sectors professionals.

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