

Negotiating Informality

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I am a historical anthropologist of the Present. My earlier and ongoing research projects explore themes in informality, infrastructure technologies, urban history and governmentality studies in late-colonial and postcolonial India. I am particularly invested in studying the materiality of mass politics as India transitioned from imperial sovereignty to popular sovereignty. I divide my time between academia and activism, and try to work at their critical interface, making use of one context to ask questions of another. Coming from this background, the current meeting at the Bellagio Centre holds a very special meaning to me, whose objective, I believe, is to create new configurations of urban and regional knowledge by enabling a conversation among representatives coming from academic, activist and policy backgrounds. I hope that the meeting will create a platform for horizontal interaction between different geographies of knowledge on urban informality produced in and on several cities, and thereby to develop a toolkit for understanding urban matters through the parameters of what can be called a ‘trans-city interrogation’.

Constructing a critical history of the sidewalks in the postcolonial city of Calcutta, my first academic project (PhD dissertation) examined the socio-economic processes and politics of urban informality with special reference to street hawkers and pavement dwellers. Combining archival and ethnographic research, I tracked the complex networks within the informal sector (such as the associations of street hawkers), analysed the political economy of displacement in a neo-liberal context, and mapped the conflicted terrain of postcolonial urban space where quasi-legal street actors, state agencies and various other social groups collude and collide on an everyday basis, I contend, in order to curiously institutionalise informality. Connecting the specific political articulations of a postcolonial locale and the everyday life histories of mobile, mercantile capital, the work ventured to contribute to both the critical literature of postcolonial urban histories and the methodological debates about new political histories.

In a set of subsequent publications in scholarly journals and newspapers, I tracked the life of the National Policy on Urban Street Vendors that in 2014, gave way to India’s first Street Vendors Act. The discussion around this piece of legislation had an unusually long public life in academic and bureaucratic circles, as well as in the street vendors’ everyday negotiations with civic governments and other political and social groups in various Indian cities. This was also one of the first attempts by the Indian state to govern informal economy in general and integrate the street hawkers question with concerns regarding urban planning. My papers on the life of this legislation bear the traces of the conflictual conjuncture that simultaneously pushes the poor to the ever-expanding margins of the city and ensures their social reproduction through strategic deployment of welfare schemes. Thus, we are not surprised that the state—while reconfiguring its very foundation in the principles of the market—is seeking to address street vending in terms of social security and inclusion in national accounting, et cetera, with a view towards a greater intensification of the government through institutionalization.

Two Instances of Negotiation

Instance I: Calcutta: Street Vendors and Pedestrians

In March 2009, the Hawker Sangram Committee (HSC), a federation of 32 hawker unions in Calcutta decided to organize a mass contact drive to counter a spell of devastating media attack on hawkers. The HSC formed a team that visited hawkers’ stalls, and interacted with hawkers, and documented pedestrian behaviour. The idea was to reaffirm the intimacy of the hawkers’

connection with the rest of society and establish that hawking was not the primary cause of congestion, accidents, or pedestrian immobility.

As a member of that team, I was asked, in particular, to demonstrate that the notion of a conflict of interest between pedestrians and hawkers was premised on factually wrong assumptions. The investigating team, which comprised hawkers and activists, visited as many as twenty-two busy street intersections of the city, observing transactions and talking to all willing participants. The team interacted with shop owners, traffic police, shopping mall employees, transport sector workers, office goers, pavement dwellers, hospital visitors, and daily commuters.

Our observation and survey continued for two months. We asked hawkers about pedestrians and vice versa, but we spent more time observing how pedestrians and hawkers engaged with each other. We thus could not but note how human relations on the street were framed and mediated by the street apparatus – benches, traffic barriers, bollards, streetlamps, traffic lights and signs, bus and tram stops, taxi and auto rickshaw stands, public lavatories, municipal water taps, tree protectors, memorials, public sculptures, waste receptacles, and so on. And lastly, we learnt how the street actors developed their own theories of association.

Generally, hawkers set up their stalls either in front of buildings, and use the walls facing the sidewalk, and opposite buildings and other shops at the kerbside edge of the sidewalk, forming a corridor in the middle for pedestrian traffic. The ideal site for a food stall, according to food hawkers, is the mid-point between the municipal water tap and the drain at the kerbside of the sidewalk. The chances of transaction improve with proximity to busy transit points and the hawkers' access to certain utilities (such as a municipal water tap) by the sidewalk. Lucrative stall spaces are also traded and rented out (something that the SVA thoroughly 'illegalizes').

In the garment sector, shopkeepers often collude with hawkers to extend their shop interiors to the sidewalk – hawkers sell the shopkeepers' merchandise at a lower price to access a different consumer base and, in return, use the electricity connections at the shops and store their wares there when the market is closed. But, the established food sellers, vegetable vendors and fruit sellers usually view hawkers near marketplaces, where they normally cluster, as potential encroachers upon their consumer base; the authorities too feel that they usurp ratepayers' privileges. This antagonism often leads to small-scale eviction of hawkers. In Kolkata's New Market area one finds instances of this antagonism between the shop owners and hawkers.

The 'evidence' we collected enabled the HSC, in certain ways, to frame its official position regarding pedestrianism. Subsequently, the HSC organized a road show of photographs that demonstrated how hawkers and pedestrians inhabit a kind of shared network in which categories continuously overreach their assigned labels. The pedestrians were classed/grouped into categories like the occasional visitor, the regular, the office worker, etc.; the hawker at times became a pedestrian and customer; the tree protector and lamp post turned out to be ideal supports for a tarpaulin sheet. Many of our pedestrian respondents pointed out that in congested hawking areas, such as in Shyambazar and Gariahat (in Kolkata), the long continuum of tarpaulin roofs protected them from sunburn and rain. Some mentioned how in the late evenings the city was illuminated thanks to the abundance of electricity hook-ups at hawkers' stalls.

The more one follows these arrangements in particular situations, the more one understands how the destiny of an 'object', no matter how human or non-human by preconditions of vitality, acquires infinite dimensions but only in association with other objects. In the course of a number of street demonstrations, the HSC pointed out how the demolition of one stall in a particular area could lead to the destruction of a network of small economies that sustained the 'poor', the 'daily

commuter' and the 'lower middle class', and severely affect the way other hawkers carried out business. How does that happen? Since stalls other than mine, understood as part of a network in excess of my existence as a hawker, provide a crucial condition of my self-definition, my singular existence can make no exclusive claim upon the network. No hawker can live devoid of this crucial connection to a network that exceeds the limits of human actors (Butler 2015). When for instance, hawkers gather their stalls, new spaces between bodies and stalls are assembled whose internal dimensions and consistencies are vital for a collective living. To give you an example, in many cities, hawkers collectively buy mini generators and place them between two sets of continuous stalls. Electric wires move between stalls, producing a very different play of light and noise on the street.

The demonstrations further exhibited how the pedestrian's right of passage at a busy street intersection was hampered usually by factors other than hawkers. These included illegal extensions of shops, potholes, intermittent enclosures related to work being done on roads, drainage systems, and telephone and power lines (requiring enclosure and diversion of traffic for indefinite periods); parking spaces, both legal and illegal; and illegal shrines on streets and sidewalks.

We for instance, observed that the sidewalks were often broken and manholes adjacent to the sidewalks were open, threatening commuters with serious accidents. We also found that road repair was going on near several of the city's major crossings, suspending the normal flow of traffic. A lack of coordination between different state departments was evident. In one instance, it was found that a busy street intersection where a new flyover was to be erected the condition of the sidewalk was unfriendly to pedestrian passage. Once the roads were repaired by the PWD, Kolkata Telephones started digging up the land. When Kolkata Telephones ended its job in late 2007, the Corporation Water Department felt it necessary to repair the underground water channels. Once the Water Department repaired the sidewalks, the Conservancy Department started addressing the long-standing public demand to have a better sewerage system in the area, especially during the rainy season. This way, the streets and sidewalks remained in a state of constant repair between 2006 and 2010, indefinitely suspending 'normal' life on the streets. Since much of the public utilities run under the sidewalks, the sidewalks are the prime sites of such development and maintenance projects. Needless to say, much of the city's traffic obstruction is caused by the fact that pedestrians are forced to walk on the streets due to the enclosures caused by the repair works.

In another instance, we interviewed three traffic sergeants of the Kolkata Police and also consulted the Deputy Commissioner of Police in charge of the traffic police in the central part of the city. All of them attested to the fact that most reports of road accidents in their jurisdictions occur between 11 p.m. and 8 a.m. We also interviewed the superintendent of Bangur Hospital at Tollygunge, who corroborated that the largest number of accident patients arrived between late night and early morning. In fact, this is the time when hawkers are not present on the sidewalks to potentially obstruct pedestrian mobility. This piece of information was important for the hawkers to contest the view that it is because of the obstruction put forth by the hawkers that the pedestrians leave safe and secure sidewalks to walk on the carriageways.

To verify whether pedestrians thought that hawkers act as an impediment to their mobility, forcing them to risk their lives on the streets, we interviewed five pedestrians in each of the 22 crossings. Our pedestrian sample size was thus, 110. Though it was hard for us to determine the class background of each of our respondents, we could make out, observing their clothes, bags, cell phones, wrist watches and other accessories, that an overwhelming proportion (94.5 per cent) of the sample came from middle to lower middle-class backgrounds (we also deliberately chose people from this class anticipating that they would have a strong anti-hawker feeling). We also wanted to make the representation from both genders nearly equal. Thus, we had 54 female

respondents (49.1 per cent) (between ages 21 and 65 years) and 56 male respondents (50.9 per cent) (between ages 20 and 75 years). We asked each of our respondents three sets of questions: a) whether they thought that street hawkers cause an obstruction to their mobility and whether they thought that evicting all hawkers from crossings would solve the problem of obstruction; b) whether they were frequent visitors of the street stalls; c) whether some regulation would add value to street hawking and improve traffic.

Table 1: Pedestrian Survey on ‘Do Hawkers Cause Obstruction to Your Passage?’

Do Hawkers Cause Obstruction	No. of People
Yes	19
At Times	81
No	10

From the Table 1, it can be observed that ten respondents said that street hawkers do not cause any impediment to their mobility on the sidewalks. 81 respondents claimed that sidewalks become inaccessible during the festive season or cyclically. However, they were of the opinion that even the seasonal or cyclic congestions could not be enough reason to evict hawkers from crossings as they did not find any immediate solution either to the hawker problem or to the problems of traffic or to the mass hysteria of shopping associated with festive seasons. Of the total respondents, 19 found a strong correlation between congestion and street hawking, out of which seven accepted that the positives of hawking outnumber the negatives while 12 respondents were in favour of complete eviction of hawkers from important crossings to facilitate pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

Table 2: Pedestrian Survey on “Should Hawkers be Evicted for Your Passage?”

Should Hawkers be Evicted	No. of People
NO	98
Yes	12

If we look at the number of respondents who want hawkers to be evicted, 98 feel that there is no need to evict the hawkers, while only 12 are of the opinion that hawkers should be evicted. While addressing the second question, all the respondents (110 out of 110) said that they bought wares and services from hawkers. Street food was preferred by 103 respondents (93.6 per cent) while 45 of them (43.7 per cent) expressed concerns over public health issues associated with street food vending and justified their street food eating in terms of price, convenience and variety. We found that all the respondents were in support of some form of regulation on street hawking. However, a significant majority of the sample (107 out of 110) said that there are several other reasons that obstruct the free flow of traffic-- Political rallies, *dharna*, strikes, inefficiency of the traffic police, road repair works and car parking appeared to top the list. A significant enough number, 100 of our respondents strongly felt that a growing demand for parking of vehicles was leading to the problem of encroachment on sidewalks, open spaces and consequently, congestion. None of our respondents had a clear idea of the nature and mandate of the regulations to be implemented on hawking. The limited sampling and class homogeneity of the sample do not allow us to discern a general trend in the hawker-pedestrian-consumer relation. Yet the sample clearly shows the falsity of the assumption that sidewalk hawking is responsible for pedestrian flight from the sidewalk. Further, in conversation, a regular visitor to a popular tea stall near the Kalighat Metro Station, who also resided in a well-to-do neighbourhood near Lake Market, told us how, during Operation Sunshine in 1996-97, a number of residents of his locality allowed hawkers to dump their wares

for months in their premises. This is perhaps an instance to suggest that the *bhadralok* and the hawkers have over the years established important social and economic exchanges.¹

In their explanation to the public of the many causes of pedestrians' flight from sidewalks, the HSC demonstrations actually admitted to hawkers' stalls being potential impediments to pedestrian mobility, but only as one of numerous such impediments. The demonstrations asserted that despite their 'encroachment', hawkers merited a grant of immunity, as they provided the poorer social classes with 'services' at a remarkably low cost, and thus contributed to the country's economy². As one of the HSC leaders said, 'We keep the city affordable and accessible to the poor. We are here as poor pedestrians require us to be here. We are also here to create the pedestrian.' At this precise moment, the HSC perhaps invented an entire cosmos where the hawker's claim to space became a claim to enter society's structures of obligation. In fact, as he mentioned, as a sale strategy, hawkers encouraged pedestrians to walk on sidewalks rather than on the streets.

The HSC leader's comment encapsulated also of course the political economy of street vending in cities like Calcutta. The leader reminded the rest of the city that hawkers survive but also contribute to the circulation (the hallmark of pedestrianism) of commodities, money, and bodies. While the apparent conflict of interest between the 'mobile' pedestrian and the 'immobile' hawker could continue to frame conceptions and decisions concerning urban street life even after the coming into action of the SVA, the HSC's campaign could throw light, by virtue of both its form and content, upon the much deeper structural connections among diverse elements of the street that implicate each other in mutual creation, and often exceed their intended utility to create multiple publics around them. Thus, like pedestrianism, counter-pedestrianism attaches much significance to the relationality among bodies, spaces and things.

Instance II: Street Food Vendors in a Delhi Neighbourhood (project undertaken by Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay and Ashish Ranjan):

Street food vendors are generally found in office areas, business districts, busy transit points, in the vicinity of educational institutes and hospitals—areas that attract a floating 'day' population as well as the workers who run those establishments. Their routine is tied to the active working hours of these establishments. The regular eaters in these stalls have a specific lunch hour when they come out and have food on the streets. The regular visitors tend to have strong 'brand loyalty', if we may call it, to particular stalls. In summer, many of them do not prefer to carry 'tiffin' (lunch box), as they call it, from faraway places for the sake of freshness. The transport sector workers like those who drive buses, trucks, rickshaws and auto-rickshaws tend to depend fully on street vendors. Cooking the meal before the eyes of the customer and serving it from the frying pan have been a time-worn practice in Indian cities. Many a times, the city Corporation officials and cops

¹ It is important to mention that the generation who took to street hawking in Calcutta between 1950s and 1970s, were often college/university educated children of the 'Midnight'. A chronic state of unemployment among the educated section of urban dwellers of those decades threw many college students to the informal economy and radical politics (see Lubell 1974). I know at least three such ex-hawkers (who subsequently moved to different occupations, but, actively took part in trade union activities during Operation Sunshine), who used to organize night classes with fellow hawkers and wrote a series of pamphlets in Bangla in 1980s and 1990s, making hawkers aware of their location in the context of the global political economy. Viewing from this perspective, it appears that at least in Calcutta, the hawkers and the *bhadralok* had historical connections and affinities due to larger processes like the 'long Partition' that affected all social classes.

run after the street vendors to stop this custom to maintain the hygienic state of the public space. Court orders often go against food vendors for ‘causing nuisance’ in open public spaces by cooking meals. *However, such prohibitions largely remain unimplemented precisely because the customers insist the vendors to keep on producing the sensory evidence of freshness for food items they are supposed to eat. Thus, the street food vendor appears to operate between two conflicting registers of hygiene and public health—if one demands that they should not pollute the air by converting the entire street into a massive kitchen, the other urges on her/him to keep food hygienic by making it ready at the beck and call.*

The street food vendor is also the vehicle to turn the street into a cosmopolitan sensory world. Consider a neighbourhood like the Jawaharlal Nehru Road in Calcutta or Rajiv Chawk in Delhi. The food vendors in these areas sell a diverse range of dishes mixing regions and culinary creeds. It is through her/his mediation that Dosa, Idli and Vada became popular in North Indian cities, Dhokla travelled from Gujarat to Delhi and Kolkata, Vada Pao of Bombay became popular near the South City Mall in Kolkata, and North-Eastern, Tibetan and Chinese cuisine acquired a distinct Punjabi smell in Delhi. Tastes travel with street vendors. Arguably, this is one sector that appears to have played a significant role in weakening the institution of untouchability in food habit and eating practices in many parts of urban India. At times, the vendor’s dress, language, appearance and the food she/he sells make her communal/caste/ethnic identities amply clear to the potential customer. However, in many cases, such identities also remain largely anonymous to the customer. Still, exchange takes place. In India, this is not a small thing. Thus, the vendor plays a significant role in making the city distinctive from other human settlements through silent propagation of anonymity. Thus, she/he becomes an unconscious agent of modernity and capital. The food vendor juxtaposes cultures and unifies production, circulation and service with minimal initial investment. All such things compelled me to work on street food vendors. If as modern subjects, we valorise equality, we have to recognize this agent of equality who makes streets distinct from other public spaces. This is an attempt to self-reflexively learn to confer recognition to this practice.

In 1990s a survey on the street food sector in Calcutta by All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health revealed that a total of 911 consumers were interviewed from various important commercial areas and transit points, of whom a staggering 80 percent were male and rest female earning between 250 rupees and rupees 1000 (at the point, USD 1 = Rs 30). The survey further revealed that in some of the prominent business districts of central Calcutta about 75 percent office goers obtained at least part of their mid-day meal from food vendors. In 2008, a survey on the street food sector in Calcutta by Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay revealed that the hawkers make available a variety of cooked food priced between Rs 10 and Rs 50 (at the point when USD 1 = Rs 45). In 2017, a survey on the street food sector in Delhi by Bandyopadhyay and Ranjan estimated that the street hawkers make available a variety of cooked food priced between Rs 30 to Rs 100 (at the point, USD 1 = Rs 64). Food sector of street vending plays a crucial role in maintaining and reproducing low income workforce of a city. It helps to sustain informal economy and also subsidizes the accumulation economy.

Street food vendors at Laxmi Nagar, Delhi

Since the opening of the metro-station in Lakshminagar nearly a decade ago, this east Delhi working class/ lower middle class neighbourhood has witnessed remarkable changes in local business and demography. Nearly 500 street vendors provide service to students living there as paying-guests, transport sector and retail workers, shops and tutorial homes. These (mostly migrant) hawkers generally live in slum areas. Usually, they bribe the cops to mitigate the risk of eviction. In each vending zone vendors select a leader who collects money from vendors on monthly or sometimes weekly basis. Usually, he realizes his cut and passes the rest on to the cops. In my survey, I observed it almost everywhere. If, for instance, a locality has 20 vendors the cops

settle with the leader for a weekly collection of Rs. 20,000. Now, to gather this sum, the leader has to collect at least Rs. 1000 from each vendor. But he collects like 1300 rupees. Thus, the leader keeps this extra 6 thousand per week in his pocket after paying 20 thousand rupees to the cops. In addition, the MCD officials also collect money from them on the monthly basis to ensure cleanliness in the neighbourhood. This way, a vendor ends up paying around Rs. 1500 every week. A survey done by National Hawker Federation on the hawkers of Delhi shows that approximately 3000 crore rupees are being collected from hawkers every year. Even the retail shops are seen to have extracted money from the hawkers who vend near their shop. Retail shopkeeper collects money on the monthly basis in lieu of certain infrastructural services.

In many ways, street food vendors in Laxmi Nagar represent many of the well documented features of the population groups working in the urban informal economy. Our respondents are predominantly male migrant workers with an average education level of class 8th standard. A significant majority of vendors are permanent migrants as opposed to seasonal migrants, which means, they offer their service throughout the year. Only a minority of street vendors are women (6 out of 100). The demographic mismatch at the fault line of gender, although not remarkable, provoked us to inquire into the availability of certain infrastructures in the area available to both men and women. Women street vendors from across the country report a critical absence of enclosed toilets in most of the streets in neighbourhood. Cases of urinary tract dysfunction are significantly high among women as a consequence.

One significant thing about street food vending in Laxmi Nagar is that the vendors generally do not offer 'meals' comprising of daal, chawal and sabji in a typical north Indian set-up. Instead, they offer items like various kinds of roll, chhola bhatura, paani puri, momos, fried rice, chilly chicken, noodles etc. The established eateries in this area, on the other hand, sell meals (*thali*) and fruit juice. This means, in Laxmi Nagar, the street vendors and the established eateries have their well-recognized, and demarcated areas of expertise. This also means that a direct competition between the eateries and street food vendors is not a matter of serious consideration. Rather, it appears, they come to complement each other in relationship of mutual reciprocity. We observed, a number of street food vendors use the nearby shops including the eateries to store their wares at the end of a business day. A number of street vendors reported that at the time of excessive sunburn and torrential rain, they rush to these shops to keep their things in good order.

As various works on street vending tell us, the dynamics of connection between the hawkers and the shopkeepers determine the nature of police action and government intervention on street vending. *Bandyopadhyay(2016) in his historical and ethnographic mapping of anti-hawker drives in Calcutta over the last four decades has unravelled how, in certain places, eviction operations actually thin out competition between the established retailers and street vendors, and how in some other places established shop owners come to extend their political support to street vendors and protect them from the governments and anti-hawker drives.* Places where an established credit network is in operation in which shopkeepers either make credits available to street vendors, or sell through street vendors, and thereby annex a bit of public space in their favour, anti-hawker drives are seen to be less effective. Street food vendors are generally vulnerable in places where high-end restaurant culture is in place. Those restaurants usually find street food vendors as causing unnecessary obstructions to their potential costumers-costumers who prefer high end restaurants over the street food. In Laxmi Nagar, the existence of such cleanly demarcated population does not exist. Those who eat in eateries, also eat on the street. They just make a choice between the principal diet and what is largely deemed to be subsidiary fast food. Places where student population concentrate, there is a high probability that fast food sector would flourish, as younger generations generally choose fast food over principle food diet at least once or twice in a day. It appears to me that in Laxmi Nagar an equilibrium exists between demand and supply, and in this, street vendors compliment the eateries in offering a diverse basket to

costumers. With the establishment of numerous boarding houses for students in this area and a flourishing multi-model transport system after the inauguration of the metro services, there has been a steady consumer base for both the eateries and the vendors.

Generally, auto drivers and rickshaw pullers prefer to eat from the frontally located shops along the service-road beneath the metro station. A sizeable section of street food vendors concentrates along this road. The eateries, on the other hand, are situated in a mesh of lanes inside the neighbourhood. The reason why transport sector workers prefer hawkers over eateries is also the proximity between the auto-stand and the hawkers' stalls. They say that they can attend a potential passenger if they are physically closer to the stand. In what follows from this is that the street food vendors enjoy the privilege of proximity to the nodes of traffic circulation which the established eateries do not. Hence, we anticipate a potential rental conflict between street vendors and eateries if there is a sudden decline in the demand for cooked food in this area, or if the street vendors decide to sell *thalis* and thereby encroach upon the steady consumer base of the eateries.

Typically, a student living with friends in a boarding house does not like to set up a well-functioning kitchen in the boarding house because of the following factors: a) they might move to another place very soon, in which case the distribution of kitchen materials would create a problem within the group, b) Often, the perceived costs involved in cooking for one's own consumption in the absence of a refrigerator exceeds that of purchasing cooked food from outside. In addition, the owners of boarding houses do not allow the installation of such consumer durables using the same source of electricity. In such prevailing conditions in Laxmi Nagar, which is typical of a migrant's hub in an urban metropolitan set-up, the co-existence of various segments of a low circuit economy becomes possible.

In a sense, then street food vending in Laxmi Nagar provides a crucial subsidy to the social reproduction of a lower middle-class section of migrants in a city like Delhi which could otherwise have been unliveable for the lower middle class and poorer social classes. *The activities of street food vendors hide a huge social cost involved in the reproduction of this system of subsidy. The street food vendors expose themselves not just to the vagaries of extremities of Delhi weather, but also to huge vehicular pollution which significantly reduce their vitality as human beings. One thing that kept on haunting us is the fact that we always failed to predict our respondents' age. They appeared much older than what they were. Therefore, it is important to reflect on the impact of environmental degradation, pollution, and climate change while thinking of their compensation package in terms of Provident Fund and ESI. A mere quantitative analysis of their contribution to the making of the city does not and cannot fully recognize the unpaid component of their socially necessary labour time that has historically gone into the commodification of the urban space. A social audit of this sort is still awaiting its scholar.*