

# Obstruction: counter-pedestrianism and trajectories of an infrastructure public

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**Abstract** The paper advances ‘obstruction’ as a key to unlock urban infrastructures. Conceptualizing the modern city in terms of motion (of bodies, things and finances) has been our academic commonsense since the growth of research interest on urban settlements in the mid-nineteenth century. The motion narrative posits obstruction as its negation, which it eventually conquers, and keeps on deferring obstruction’s final advent—the deathly city. The paper is a critique of this urban autobiography. It shows how obstruction makes certain forms of collective living possible. It describes the possibility of such collective living as ‘infrastructure publics’—a rather new noun compound—that interrogates the taken for grantedness of both ‘public’ and ‘infrastructure’.

**Keywords** Infrastructure · Public · Sidewalk · Street vending · Pedestrian · Zoning

## Introduction

In this paper, I revisit unobstructed motion as a central aspect of urbanism and show how obstruction makes certain forms of collective living possible. I describe

the possibility of such collective living as ‘infrastructure publics’—a rather new noun compound—that I hope can interrogate the taken for grantedness of both ‘public’ and ‘infrastructure’.

Some recent developments necessitating my revision of the binary between obstruction and motion are firstly the increasing multiplication of graded precarity under conditions of neoliberalism, especially as it might apply to street vendors and similar kinds of livelihood earners on the streets. A related development of this order is the increasing limitations impressed upon the street as a public site of protest whereby specific spatial and temporal demarcations tend to specify exactly what part of our material existence can be accessed as the infrastructure of political activity. A third development may refer to a new spell of protests in our times that try to create a climate of conversation and solidarity among social classes.<sup>1</sup> How to characterize these emergent collectives? Who constituted the ‘people’ in these

<sup>1</sup> In Hyderabad, a street hawkers’ association publicly proclaimed its logistical support to the students’ movement at Hyderabad Central University (HCU) when the University authority cut the provisioning of electricity, internet, food and water in the protest-ridden campus. Perhaps, for the first time in history, street hawkers and University students organized a joint March in Kolkata after the suicide (widely interpreted by the protesting students as an instance of ‘institutional murder’) of Rohith Vemula (a Dalit student at the HCU). In a press conference, the largest federation of street hawkers in India expressed solidarity with the protesting HCU and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) students.

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assemblies? And how to think of these collectives in a time of neoliberal rule as making claims on both politics on the sidewalk as well as of the sidewalk?

In what follows, this paper discusses a particular mode of engagement of street hawkers with the governmental state and the larger public in contemporary Indian cities (Bandyopadhyay 2010, 2016). I call this engagement ‘counter-pedestrianism’ (Bandyopadhyay 2015). I show how counter-pedestrianism might offer a critique of the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 (GOI 2014), which is widely believed to have established the ‘rights’ of the street hawkers to the sidewalk. I hope to describe via this the rudiments of a formative association taking shape between the hawker and the realm of democratic politics in India that might actually lend certain directionality to the way in which large masses of working populations might have to stake their claims of livelihood and entitlements in the future. The point then is to both describe as well as yield an analytic of ‘politics’ if by that term, we understand the ways in which groups of people participate in the manner and matter of their own ruling.

## Section I: Sidewalk as a contested space

Let us start by invoking the history sidewalk as a contested space (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009; Bandyopadhyay 2010). Such an exercise will enable us to situate the study in a global-sociomaterial perspective. Sidewalk is an elevated margin of the street shaped by distinct architectural order and regulations. As a clearly marked-out space for ‘on foot’ navigation, sidewalk of some forms, along both the edges of the street, was known to the Roman city dwellers. The Romans had in use the term *semita* from the third century BC, the meaning of which closely corresponds to our modern understanding of the sidewalk (Kostof 1992). In the centuries of overall decline of civic establishments following the decline of the Roman Empire, sidewalks lost their utility within a walled medieval cityscape. They resurfaced first in England in the late eighteenth century and subsequently, in the early nineteenth century in Paris, precisely to address the problem of circulation of bodies and things with the opening up of cities to their hinterlands (Kostof 1992; Winter 1993; Foucault 2007). The paved and elevated footpaths gave the

foot passenger a secure walkway, sharply distinguishing human locomotion from faster horse wagons and carriages. With the introduction of automobiles since the late 1890s, the separation between the sidewalk and the carriageway became a global paradigm for street design.<sup>2</sup>

As automobiles began to revolutionize speed within a cluttered urban space, the structural and functional segregation between the carriageway (for automobile traffic) and the sidewalk (for pedestrian movement) emerged as a pervasive commonsense among city planners, reformers, police and civic administrators.<sup>3</sup> The macro segregation of the street between the carriageway and the sidewalk was coupled with the creation of a number of small and interstitial spaces. Thus, within a street, one can identify travel lanes, parking lots, curbside edge bordering the sewer channel and the outer sidewalk areas where one finds lampposts, water taps, railings, newspaper boxes (in some cities), treeline, outdoor benches and various kinds of doorway displays. In other words, the street was gradually broken up into ‘discrete zones’, increasing the ‘specialization of urban space’ (Blomley 2011, 61). A new generation of urban professionals and reformers began to argue that spatial zoning in the principle of mono-functionality of spaces would ultimately ensure better circulation of bodies and things in the city. From the nineteenth century, parsing of spaces into ‘discrete zones’ (Blomley 61) began to be justified as serving ‘public purpose’. The public purpose of the sidewalk, for instance, was to ensure a ‘smooth system of movement’ (Ehrenfeucht and Loukaitou-Sideris 2007, 110). It was only the pedestrian who became the

<sup>2</sup> Winter (1993) documents the emergence of the raised curb and footpaths in London streets: “with the introduction of macadam paving, the water was directed into side gutters rather than a gutter down the middle, making it essential to raise the curb of the footpath” (1993, 36–37). As streets increasingly became concave, they needed embankments to direct the storm water horizontally without allowing it to inundate adjacent neighbourhoods lying on less elevated surfaces. In short, the birth of sidewalk was symptomatic of a massive transformation in the ways in which cities began to be conceptualized in the nineteenth century.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, pedestrian as a ‘motion’ category, and as the *only* legitimate user of the sidewalk, is a much recent phenomenon. It came from the Latin *pedester* meaning ‘plain, not versified, prosaic’. In the first half of the eighteenth century, it only had the adjectival function to mean ‘prosaic, dull’. From the late eighteenth century, precisely in 1791 it also came to mean ‘on foot’ (<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=pedestrian>).

legitimate public on the sidewalk. Needless to say, the identity of such a public was premised upon a series of exclusions. The pedestrian emerged as a new kind of liberal, right-bearing (male) urban individual who was classless, nameless, unbound by social ties (Dutta 2007), disconnected from the past and engaged in perusal of private ends (Anjaria 2016).

The change in the forms of the street had profound influence in the way in which street spaces were understood and used. As a result of the raised sidewalks, the carriageway became larger proportionately, but also ‘more sharply differentiated from the other parts (increasing the amount of legal ambiguity about what the term “street” was meant to convey)’ (Winter 1993, 100). Pedestrians could still use the entire carriageway, but the centre increasingly appeared to be less convenient and the footways became dedicated to pedestrians. As, with the passage of time, spaces became conceptually separate, they acquired specific social profiles and popular meanings. Winter tells us, with these changes curbside between the walkway and the carriageway assumed the character of a ‘border territory’, where goods were unloaded, costermongers stood, and water collected. Winter writes, ‘Vagabonds, prostitutes, drunks, gambling touts, and beggars sought their livelihood on the pavements but, according to convention, were continually teetering on the verge of a descent into that part of the street where, according to tradition, all immorality and corruption finally end’ (1993, 100).

In many cities, the raising of sidewalks allowed for the bleeding of commercial activities at their edges. The imprecise margin between the private and the public now had a buffer zone to make the matter of segregation more difficult. In many cities, raising of sidewalks was financed by the owners of properties abutting the street (Schivelbusch 1995). In short, in the history of modern urban government, sidewalk has remained a much-negotiated category. Various social groups have contested the mindless criminalization of obstructions. As early as in 1903–1904, such a contestation took place in the Burrabazar area of Calcutta. The British dominated Bengal Chamber of Commerce (BCC) for instance, observed that serious obstructions took place in the narrow and congested neighbourhoods of the Burrabazar due to the loading and unloading of goods from bullock carts to the gowdowns. However, the BCC also made the point that ‘the loading and unloading of goods in streets and lanes

of Burra Bazaar cannot be prevented without bringing business to a standstill’ (*Report of the Committee of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce for the Year 1904*, Vol. 2:279). The Marwari Association in the area resisted the active surveillance of the European ‘Inspectors of Footpath’ and kept the entire piece-goods market closed on 31 August 1904. A critical situation developed as the import trade of the city was suspended for a day. The Corporation had to intervene to ‘terminate a situation in which the commercial interests involved were manifestly out of all proportion to the importance of the issue at stake’. Hence, the city Corporation decided to temporarily suspend the work of the Inspector (*Report of the Committee of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce for the Year 1904*, Vol. 2:281).

In short, it can be said that the monofunctional understanding of the sidewalk as a ‘pedestrian-first’ space,<sup>4</sup> can be, and has been historically contested. In

<sup>4</sup> It is often argued that the conceptualization of pedestrian as an abstract and liberal right-bearing subject is a ‘western’ concept, and that the figure did not emerge significantly in non-western contexts. However, some of the historical evidence can also be at odds with such an argument. Anjaria (2016) has tracked how from 1920s, a new band of middle-class newspaper columnists in Bombay would start arguing that the pedestrian’s rights were increasingly being squeezed by the ‘wealth and clout of the elite and the populism of the poor’ (Anjaria 2016: 58) within a nationalizing municipal government. The idea of the pedestrian as embodying a normative public space and public sphere would soon be distinguished from that of the sidewalk hawkers. The opposition between the pedestrian and the hawker would then be mapped into separation between the idea of a ‘non-differentiated rights’ and the rooted, differentiated and entitlement-based claims of the hawkers (Anjaria 2016: 28). To present some contemporary evidence in this direction, a couple of years back, civic authorities in a number of Indian cities started a programme earmarking a few hours of a particular day in a week free of vehicular traffic to facilitate pedestrians’ symbolic takeover of certain historic neighbourhood of cities (*The Hindu*, 8 September 2015, TOI, 25 November 2015). The ‘open streets’ movement, as it is called, has become popular among sections of the middle-class city dwellers. Such clamours for pedestrian’s right can potentially turn into a middle-class battle against ‘unlawful activities’ on the streets such as squatting and hawking (Anjaria 2008). It is thus possible to at least argue that in India, pedestrian activism has a continuous history, though its import to colonial and postcolonial contexts added new cultural dimensions that remained unanticipated in metropolitan contexts. While, for instance, proposing a plan of sidewalks for Calcutta’s newly paved Russa Road, Patrick Geddes (1914) reminded the European planners that sidewalks in Indian cities needed to be wider than their European counterparts, for else, the *fear of pollution through physical contact* would dissuade the Indians to use them, and throw them onto the carriageways.

the rest of the paper, I will describe such an attempt undertaken by a group of organized street hawkers in Calcutta. I will show how the hawkers' attempt to reclaim the sidewalk pushes the boundary of the public forward to make it more inclusive, and represents the vision of an infrastructure public in which sidewalk is projected as the infrastructure of everyday street life, and street hawking becomes the infrastructure for the social reproduction of pedestrian.

## Section II: Pedestrianism

Street hawkers often face eviction as they are deemed as obstructing pedestrian flow. The sidewalk, we have seen in the previous section, is engineered as a well-marked out zone for the pedestrian, whose right of passage has been a stable modern legal axiom. Often the pedestrian becomes the symbol of the urban everyman being increasingly run-off the sidewalk by automobile traffic and by different forms of 'encroachment' on pedestrian spaces. Moreover, the sidewalk is supposed to be withdrawn from private appropriations. Any kind of formal-legal recognition of stationary hawkers on the sidewalks will have to then deal with both the pedestrian's inviolable right of passage, as well as the distribution of property between public and private domains. It will also have to justify obstruction which is considered the negation of motion of bodies, commodities and finance.

Unlike the abstract pedestrian's rights, which are fundamental to the law of public space in a city, the street vendor's 'rights' have usually been founded on a series of exceptions and contingent legality. The Street Vendors Act, 2014 (henceforth SVA) is in a way a legal 'formalisation' of the hawkers' right to livelihood that does attempt a reversal of some of this contingency. And yet it is imperative to understand the nature of the right that the SVA promises to hawkers with its continued emphasis on an extant model of conceptualizing hawkers and their existence on streets of India.

The SVA enacts a mechanism to protect the livelihood of hawkers by regulating the very means of their livelihood. At the heart of the SVA lies a concern that unregulated growth of sedentary hawkers in our cities will eventually displace the pedestrians from the sidewalk. Hence, the act of vending has to be regulated on the sidewalk to retain the pedestrian's right of passage.

Within the scope of the SVA, street vending can be regulated by partitioning the entire city into vending and non-vending zones. Only a regulated number of street vendors will be able to operate in vending zones. These zones will be governed by a participative body called the Town Vending Committee (TVC); 40 per cent of its membership will be constituted of associations of street vendors. Zoning, we know, is a disciplinary technique of power that aims to quarantine a target group through an active process of registration of its members (Government of India 2014). The SVA's central motive is thus to identify each single hawker at a proper place. The SVA appears to be sympathetic to peripatetic hawkers—if they are registered in the municipal notebook. It is concerned more with the sedentary/stationary hawkers—'objects' that can potentially obstruct pedestrian flow. In this respect, I think, the SVA is consistent with a number of earlier municipal acts over which it prevails.

These municipal legislations have for long forbidden, 'structure or fixture' or even moving vehicles for vending, having cast them as obstructions to bodies and movement on streets. The SVA modifies this approach to make for an allowance for vending material that are collapsible like folding tables and chairs made of metal and plastic rather than the traditional wooden *chowkies* to display merchandise; push carts and umbrellas rather than bamboo structure and corrugated roofing, removable plastic clothing racks, shelves and cardboard boxes of various size. But this continues to harbour a governmental rationality founded upon a clear distinction between static objects and channels of circulation like the street, the pedestrian zone and drain. The static objects are viewed as obstructing the free circulation of pedestrians and of air and water. In this sense, the street hawker is nothing more than an urban object legitimate only in so far as she does not obstruct the pedestrian flow.

Measures like the SVA then continue to pronounce law, in howsoever modified ways, upon the conditions of eviction rather than the means of inclusion or facilitation of livelihood on streets. The proto-legal entity of the pedestrian (and her/his 'rights') could very well be a necessary medium for the operation of a powerful yet little recognized governing principle for disciplining bodies and objects on modern streets. This principle following Nicholas Blomley (2011) could be

termed ‘pedestrianism’—a rationality that ‘structures the ways in which state agents think about and act upon the spaces of the city’ (106). Pedestrianism focuses on concerns such as flow, placement, and circulation of bodies and things and as Blomley explains, ‘pedestrianism can treat the human subject as essentially “an object”, either in motion or at rest’ (9).

Several arguments are frequently made against hawkers from the point of view of pedestrianism. First, as Bromley (2000) points out, hawkers tend to concentrate densely in locations with higher pedestrian and vehicular convergence. It is often seen that pedestrians crossing street markets and passengers inside stationary or slow-moving vehicles often make instinctive purchases from hawkers, causing interruption in traffic. Needless to say, street vendors concentrate towards the congestion, because that is where they expect, they would find their customers. As a result, street sale and congestion constitute each other (Bromley 2000, Bhowmik and Saha (2012). Second, by obstructing traffic, hawkers are responsible for traffic accidents (Bromley 2000; Naik 2013). Third, it is also said that they block important building sites and impede the access of emergency vehicles to those sites in moments of crisis and mass hysteria (Bromley 2000, Naik 2013). Even cursory look at popular newspapers would give us an understanding of how the opposition between the pedestrian and the hawker is almost naturalized in urban discourses (Dutta 2007).

Blomley is convinced that opposition to pedestrianism cannot come from the humanist perspective long upheld by activists and academics who treat the ‘public space as a space, first and foremost, of [the] people’ (p. 8). He thus considers the ‘civic humanist’ perspective of human rights as always already superseded by the apparently banal ‘post-humanist’ perspective of pedestrianism. The alternative, for him, should then emerge from ‘within pedestrianism’ (p. 111). In dealing with them, we then perhaps need a radical but also practical critique of the pedestrian-centric understanding of the sidewalk in law and policy. In this paper, I propose to arrive at such a critique in two ways. I first unsettle the figure of the pedestrian showing how at least in Indian cities pedestrian has historically been an unstable construction susceptible to a number of appropriations. I then narrate how in Kolkata in the recent past organized sidewalk hawkers had articulated a powerful ethics of creative obstruction, and collective appropriation of the sidewalk.

### Section III: Counter-pedestrianism

While the SVA marks the founding instance of both legal recognition as well as strategic manoeuvring of the hawkers by the government, it has perhaps managed to erect itself only on certain grounds of legitimacy that have functioned in lieu of legal measures to enable the hawkers to practice their trade. These grounds of legitimacy were crafted prior to explicit legal sanction through engaged public action. One such initiative was that of the Hawker Sangram Committee (HSC). Founded in 1996 in the crucible of the protest against a large-scale eviction drive in Kolkata named ‘Operation Sunshine’, the HSC is the precursor to the National Hawker Federation (NHF) and the most influential federation of hawkers’ unions in Kolkata.<sup>5</sup> I would like to propose, albeit tentatively, that the HSC has sought to devise a world of what might be referred to as ‘counter-pedestrianism’.

In March 2009, the HSC leadership 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, 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

<sup>5</sup> I have elsewhere elaborated on the structure, internal operations and external linkages with people’s movements and political system that the HSC and the NHF have evolved over the last couple of decades (Bandyopadhyay 2010, 2016). Suffice is to say that the NHF is arguably the largest federation of hawkers in India with a total 1189 unions and associations of hawkers being affiliated to it, making it visible in twenty-eight states.

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; 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.

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. Eighty-one 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).

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.

**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

**Table 2** Pedestrian survey on ‘should hawkers be evicted for your passage?’

Should hawkers be evicted	No. of people
No	98
Yes	12

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.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> 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.

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 economy.<sup>7</sup> 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 Kolkata. 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-

<sup>7</sup> In fact, in early 1990s, a survey on the street food sector in Calcutta by All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health (Chakravarty and Canet, 1992) revealed that a total 911 consumers were interviewed from various important commercial areas and transit points, of whom a staggering 80 per cent were male and rest female earning between Rs. 250 and Rs. 10,000 (at that point, USD 1 = Rs. 30). The survey further revealed that in some of the prominent business districts of Central Calcutta about 75% office goers obtained at least part of their midday meal from food vendors. On an average, regular street food consumers spent Rs. 250 per months to procure their food from street stalls. During the period of this survey, Rs. 1 could buy approximately 200 kilocalories (KCAL), of which 25 kcal were protein, 144 KCAL was carbohydrate and 31 KCAL was lipid components.

pedestrianism attaches much significance to the relationality among bodies, spaces and things.

#### Section IV: Constitutive exclusions

The above discussion indicates the ways in which the facts of complex interdependencies continually haunt and bring to crisis our current conceptual frameworks. Counter-pedestrianism is an effort to bring into being an alliance and re-imagine a space of sociability to fight legal and governmental exclusions. It first asserts that we cannot act without the infrastructures/material means of action. It then suggests we should also emerge as a collective to struggle for installing and preserving those very infrastructures of action. Counter-pedestrianism thus does not take a certain pre-ordained role of the sidewalk for granted. Rather, through everyday negotiations with pedestrians, shop keepers, property owners, the state, and themselves, the hawkers create, reconfigure and ‘re-function’ materialities of infrastructures (see Butler 2011). In doing so, they periodically sidestep the bourgeois law of property, and appropriate infrastructures, and make infrastructures the focus of a collective existence (Mitchell 2014). Often, they demand concessions from the government as a matter of right to livelihood in the city. They place such claims not as a matter of rule, but as acceptable exceptions to the rule of property. At the time of competitive electoral mobilization in cities, a number of such claims define the terms on which these groups are considered parties to the governmental negotiations<sup>8</sup> (Chatterjee 2004, 2008, 2011).

Counter-pedestrianism may not be a stable state of affairs. Such attempts to socialize infrastructure, and alliances may crumble under ‘voluntary or involuntary conditions’. However, it serves a significant role in bringing into being an infrastructure public. Certainly, the infrastructure public of counter-pedestrianism brings sidewalk back to the lifeworld of the city, justifies its multifunctionality and includes a host of sidewalk users in the frame of the public. It does so at a

time when the spaces of public infrastructure are witnessing violent neoliberal restructuring, and the increasing zoning of protest is producing a normal protest form as a part of a series of other normal civic rights. Further, counter-pedestrianism creates a new imaginary of alliance at a time when we are undergoing a neoliberal reordering of the self, characterized by a strong insistence on self-sufficiency—an extreme version of individualism (Butler 2015). The SVA as well as some of the major documents of powerful unions like the NASVI clearly recognize and legitimize hawkers as micro-entrepreneurs who rely on the market forces (rather than the state) for their survival. An entrepreneur rationalizes his/her whole life by submitting to the imperative of self-improvement. At the heart of this new subject modality, that can be called *entrepreneurial subjectivity*, lie business ethics, individual responsibility and personal initiatives whose viability is often threatened ‘under conditions when self-sufficiency is structurally undermined’ (Butler 2015, 25). The entrepreneur of the self learns to navigate wage and employment insecurities and lives with the contingencies of the unforeseeable.

If the idea of an infrastructure public is based upon forming alliances among multiple users of the sidewalk, whom does it exclude? How does it implicitly establish lines of demarcation? Let us consider an example. Long back in 1992, a socio-economic survey of the hawkers of Calcutta (Dasgupta 1992) found that there existed a mismatch between the number of hawkers on the sidewalks and the number of stalls. It was then found that the stalls kept two to six persons employed. Clearly, such an evidence revealed the existence of a sizeable section of labourers in the sector whom the ‘owner’ hawkers employed. When I started my research on hawkers in Calcutta in 2006, I found that there existed an employment cycle in the sector. During two festive seasons (one during the Pujas between August and November, and another during the Chaitra Sankranti/Bengali new year between April and May), the hawkers tend to employ a significant number of labourers, especially in the stalls selling garments to attract and manage buyers by means of an aggressive and competitive use of ‘lung power’ (Sen 2011). I also found that a significant portion of these labourers were not related to the owner hawkers through blood and family relations, which implied the existence of a wage relation among those who sell on the sidewalk. The stalls hardly

<sup>8</sup> I have (Bandyopadhyay 2010, 2016) elsewhere offered an alternative to the standard ‘vote-bank’ framework for understanding the politics street hawking. I proposed that the street hawkers’ ability to operate successfully in the governmental space cannot be analysed without understanding their position within the rental economy of cities.

appeared to be an extension of the hawkers' 'family enterprise' with a perfect collapse of the employers and the employees in the figure of the hawker.<sup>9</sup>

I also found that the wage earners among hawkers are counted when the union pronounced a count of its members. However, they disappeared in the organizational structure of the union. The union appeared to be a cartel of the employer hawkers that aggregated thousands of petty employers and sellers to function in the competitive market and to operate in the governmental space. The labourer hawkers hardly constituted the political public that HSC's counter-pedestrianism constructed. The SVA excludes them when it defines the street vendor as an individual who can legally transfer her/his vending license only to a family member. The law further asserts that if a hawker makes use of other's labour, then that person should be related to him/her by blood relation or by marriage. This is where, I think, the enterprise of the union, the state and the academic arrive at a consensus. The consensus is that, in the 'informal' economy wage relations and profit motive, while not irrelevant, do not play a dominant role (Chatterjee 2008), and hence, wage relations do not exist, at least to a significant extent, in this sector beyond the confines of the participant's 'family'. The SVA comes to create a norm out of this agreement which appears to de-recognize wage workers in this sector. The law requires the practicing hawker to give an undertaking to the TVC that 'he shall carry on the business himself or through any of his family member' (p. 4). Further, to make hawking more familial, the SVA instructs that if the incumbent vendor dies or suffers from permanent injuries, his stall shall pass on to the spouse and the dependent child in order of priority (p. 4). Such clear attempts to reduce street hawking to a family affair make it difficult for wage workers among hawkers to claim for the 'right to have rights'.

The NHF has not so far raised any voice to acknowledge their existence either. Perhaps, this is

one of many 'constitutive exclusions' by which counter-pedestrianism's notion of inclusion is founded and demarcated. The success of the HSC and the NHF as pursuing a radical democratic politics will depend in future on how it addresses their discursive frontiers, and the issues of wage relations (as very often the hawkers recruit labour), profitability, accumulation and scale as street hawking is increasingly becoming subject to an anonymous market process. I am convinced that an exclusive focus on livelihood is no longer enough to follow the forms of association that the hawkers are now forced to establish.

### A concluding remark

By the terms of this paper, I have tried to highlight the notion of obstruction as providing a conceptual key to unlock urban infrastructure. Conceptualizing the modern city in terms of motion (of bodies, things and finances) has been our academic commonsense since the growth of research interest on urban settlements in the mid-nineteenth century. The motion narrative posits obstruction as its negation, which it eventually conquers, and keeps on deferring obstruction's final advent—the motionless, deathly city. However, at the other end of this imagined dystopia could perhaps be the possibility of frictionless motion, which is also really no motion but all slippage. We have seen in this paper how certain obstructions can actually enable forms of urbanism to thrive. Hence, I argue, obstruction deserves to be a positive category in urban studies. The HSC experiment shows, though it refrains from articulating it explicitly, that streets can accommodate creative obstructions that actually enable motion, albeit of different kinds. Such obstructions as that caused by the hawkers punctuate motion and provide a medium for exchange between bodies and things over space.

The paper shows that the 'public' of the present and future to come has to 'enrol' more and more such 'obstructions', to enable both its material as well as its political existence. This is even more necessary at a time when not only livelihood but also politics seems to be increasingly a matter of zoning. Zoning is an imposed control over both the 'politics of the street' as well as the 'politics on the street' (Robinson 2002). In existing urban studies frameworks, the former pertains to a referential frame of the 'everyday', the latter invariably becomes the site of the spectacular and

<sup>9</sup> In fact, scholars have noticed a dramatic decline in the growth of casual employment since the beginning of the new century, while there has been a corresponding growth in the number of regular workers and within the 'informal sector' (Kundu and Mohanan 2009). Such a trend coincided with a gradual standardization of labour relations and commodity chains in the informal sector leading to what can be termed 'un-informalization' of the informal economy (Bandyopadhyay 2015, 2016).

increasingly mediatized forms of public protest in various urban centres. If the hawker's demonstration that I described today yields any lessons, it is really one that points towards the necessity of connecting politics on and of the streets. New coalitions of students and hawkers might be enabling exactly something like that.

To conclude, let me say that I derived inspiration of thinking about obstruction from three pieces of work. The first one is of course Engels' classic introduction to the 1895 edition of Marx's 'The class struggle in France'. In this, Engels compares the fate of the barricade form of urban resistance during the 1848 and 1871 Revolutions. Even in the best days of barricade as a form of obstruction and defence, Engels says, it produced more of a 'moral than a material effect' (1895, 8), and points out that revolutions arise primarily because of political exigencies and not due to the fact that certain cities are structurally prone to insurrections (Hobsbawm 2005). Taking cue from Engels, Hobsbawm (2005) garners historical evidence of insurrectionary tactics from various cities to show that still structural aspects of a city facilitate how insurrections can spread or can be destroyed by the authority. I have also found Roy's (2011) invocation of 'blockade' instructive in my understanding of the forms of obstruction. I read Roy's invocation of blockade as a two-pronged concept: blockade as punctuating capital and blocked as producing the very condition of hegemony in the neoliberal order of things. However, all these writings point to rather episodic and exceptional forms of obstruction such as barricades (Engels and Hobsbawm), burning of trams being more effective in disrupting traffic than burning buses (Hobsbawm), political rallies clogging several busy intersections of the city (Roy), etc. In this paper, I have tried to highlight some more regular forms of obstruction that makes motion a culturally and politically negotiated affair. At present, I do not worry too much about defining/theorizing obstruction, for, at times, fuzzy concepts prove to be more productive to anticipate interconnections (Anand 2016).

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