

The Right to the Curb: Spatial Politics, Informal Labor, and the Social Precarity of Street Vendors in Junagadh

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Abstract: *This research investigates the complex sociological dimensions of street vending in Junagadh, Gujarat, a city characterized by its historical significance and rapid urban transformation. While street vendors constitute a vital organ of the urban informal economy, providing essential goods and services to diverse socio-economic strata, they remain tethered to the fringes of formal urban planning. Utilizing a qualitative framework involving semi-structured interviews and field observations, this study explores the "spatial politics" governing the streets of Junagadh, where the quest for livelihood constantly clashes with municipal "cleanliness" drives and the rhetoric of urban modernization. The findings reveal that street vendors navigate a landscape of profound "social precarity," marked by the absence of legal recognition, systemic harassment by local authorities, and the persistent threat of eviction. Furthermore, the paper analyses how these vendors negotiate their "right to the city" through informal networks and social capital, which serve as essential but fragile safety nets against institutional exclusion. Beyond mere economic hardship, the research highlights the psychological toll of stigma and the erosion of dignity inherent in criminalizing their trade. By documenting the lived experiences of vendors in Junagadh, this study contributes to the broader sociological discourse on urban marginality, arguing for a more inclusive urban governance model that recognizes informal labour not as a nuisance, but as a fundamental component of the urban social fabric.*

Keywords: Informal Economy, Spatial Politics, Urban Precarity, Street Vending

1. Introduction

The urban landscape of the contemporary Global South is defined by a striking paradox: the co-existence of gleaming aspirations for "Smart Cities" alongside the sprawling, persistent reality of the informal economy. Within this landscape, street vendors are perhaps the most visible yet sociologically misunderstood actors. In the historical and rapidly evolving city of Junagadh, Gujarat, the sidewalk is not merely a pedestrian thoroughfare; it is a contested site of survival, negotiation, and structural struggle. This research, titled *"The Right to the Curb: Spatial Politics, Informal Labor, and the Social Precarity of Street Vendors in Junagadh,"* seeks to unpack the sociological complexities that define the lives of those who inhabit these curbside economies.

Street vending is often dismissed by urban planners and the middle-class elite as a "nuisance" or a "blockage" to the fluid movement of modern life. However, from a sociological perspective, these vendors represent a vital, resilient, and adaptive response to the failures of the formal economy to provide adequate employment. In Junagadh—a city where the economy is deeply intertwined with pilgrimage tourism, local trade, and seasonal agricultural cycles—street vendors serve as a crucial bridge between production and consumption. Yet, they operate in a state of "permanent temporariness." Their presence is tolerated by the public but often criminalized by the state, creating a precarious existence that transcends mere economic hardship.

The Theoretical Framework: Spatial Politics and the Right to the City

At the heart of this study is the concept of "spatial politics." Space is never neutral; it is a manifestation of power. In Junagadh, the municipal authorities' efforts to regulate, beautify, and "rationalize" public spaces often result in the systematic displacement of vendors. Drawing on Henri

Lefebvre's seminal theory of the "Right to the City," this paper argues that the city should be a social product available to all its inhabitants, rather than a commodity reserved for those who fit into a sanitized, formal aesthetic.

For the vendors of Junagadh, the "Right to the Curb" is a daily negotiation. They must balance the need for high-visibility locations (near the Uparkot Fort, the bus station, or the bustling markets of the old city) with the constant risk of municipal raids and confiscation of goods. This creates a geography of fear, where the physical layout of the city dictates the social vulnerability of the worker. The curb becomes a frontier where the informal labour force asserts its right to exist against a state machinery that views them through the lens of illegality.

Structural Vulnerability and Social Precarity

The sociological problem of street vending is deeply rooted in "precarity"—a condition of existence without predictability or security. In Junagadh, this precarity is multi-dimensional. Economically, vendors face fluctuating daily incomes with no access to social security or institutional credit. Legally, despite the passage of the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act in 2014, the implementation at the local level remains fragmented. Many vendors in Junagadh operate without the "Vending Certificates" that would offer them legal protection, leaving them at the mercy of discretionary policing and local "hafta" (extortion) systems.

However, the most profound sociological impact is the "stigma" associated with street vending. In the social hierarchy of the city, the vendor is often viewed as an outsider or an interloper. This research explores how this social exclusion affects the vendor's sense of identity and belonging. How does a person maintain dignity when their primary means of livelihood is treated as a "violation" of urban order? By examining the lived experiences of these

individuals, we see that the street is not just a place of work, but a site of constant social resistance.

The Local Context: Junagadh's Unique Landscape

Junagadh provides a compelling case study due to its unique socio-spatial layout. As a city with a rich historical legacy and a heavy influx of pilgrims and tourists, the demand for street-level services is immense. During peak seasons like the Bhavnath Fair or the Girnar Parikrama, the number of informal traders swells, creating a temporary, vibrant economy that the formal city infrastructure cannot replicate. Yet, once the peak season passes, these vendors are often the first to be cleared during "encroachment removal" drives.

This research aims to document these cycles of inclusion and exclusion. It seeks to answer a critical question: How do vendors in Junagadh use social capital and informal networks to survive? What role do caste, religion, and gender play in the allocation of "prime" vending spots? And most importantly, how can the city of Junagadh evolve to include these essential workers in its future development plans?

2. Literature Review

The sociological study of street vending has evolved significantly over the last four decades, shifting from a view of "informality as a temporary stage" to an understanding of "informality as a structural feature" of global capitalism. This literature review explores three key thematic pillars: the dual-sector model of urban economies, the concept of spatial contestation, and the sociological lens of precarity.

1) The Informal Economy: From Marginality to Centrality

Early economic theories, such as those proposed by Lewis (1954), suggested that the informal sector was a vestige of traditional society that would inevitably disappear with industrial modernization. However, contemporary sociologists like Keith Hart (1973) and Saskia Sassen (1991) have argued that the informal economy is not a separate entity but is deeply integrated into the formal urban system. In the Indian context, the "Working Poor" (Bremner, 1996) represent a permanent class of labourers who provide low-cost goods and services that sustain the formal workforce. This research situates Junagadh's vendors within this framework, viewing them not as "backward" elements but as essential agents in the city's economic metabolism.

2) Spatial Politics and the "Right to the City"

A significant body of literature focuses on the street as a "contested space." Drawing on Henri Lefebvre (1968) and David Harvey (2008), scholars have analysed how neoliberal urbanism prioritizes "exchange value" (profit, aesthetics, tourism) over "use value" (survival, social interaction). Anjaria (2011), in his study of Mumbai's street vendors, highlights how the discourse of "encroachment" is used by middle-class activists and the state to delegitimize the presence of the poor in public spaces. In Junagadh, this spatial contestation is exacerbated by the city's identity as a heritage and pilgrimage site. The literature suggests that the removal of vendors is often a performative act of "cleansing" the city for the gaze of the "tourist-citizen," a theme this paper explores in depth.

3) Precarity and Social Capital

The concept of "precarity," as articulated by Guy Standing (2011), describes a social class (the *precarariat*) characterized by a lack of occupational identity and social stability. For street vendors, precarity is not just the absence of a steady income; it is the presence of systemic uncertainty. Sociology has increasingly focused on how marginalized groups use "social capital"—networks of trust, reciprocity, and informal unions—to mitigate this precarity (Bourdieu, 1986). Scholars studying the Indian street (Bhowmik, 2005) note that while vendors are vulnerable to state harassment, they often form "informal associations" based on kinship or locality to defend their spots. This study builds on this by examining the specific social networks within Junagadh's vending community.

4) The Gap in Research: The Mid-Sized Indian City

Most sociological research on street vending in India focuses on "megacities" like Mumbai, Delhi, or Kolkata. There is a significant scholarship gap regarding mid-sized, historically rich cities like Junagadh. Unlike metropolitan centres, Junagadh's urban logic is dictated by seasonal pilgrimage cycles and a specific vernacular architecture. By focusing on Junagadh, this paper contributes a unique perspective to the literature, moving beyond the "metropolitan bias" to understand how spatial politics function in a regional, tier-2 urban context.

3. Research Methodology

To capture the lived experiences of street vendors, this study employs a **Qualitative Research Design**. A quantitative approach alone would fail to grasp the nuances of social stigma, fear of authority, and the intricate "negotiations" that happen on the curb.

Study Site: The research is localized in three key zones in Junagadh: The **Uparkot Fort area** (tourism-centric), the **Bhavnath Taleti** (pilgrimage-centric), and the **Kalwa Chowk** (commercial/commuter-centric).

Data Collection:

- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** 25 in-depth interviews were conducted with vendors across different age groups, genders, and product categories (perishables, dry goods, and services).
- **Ethnographic Observation:** The researcher spent 20 hours observing interactions between vendors and municipal officials (JMC), as well as the "spatial claiming" techniques used by vendors to secure their spots.

Sampling Method: A **Snowball Sampling** technique was utilized. Given the informal and often "illegal" status of the work, building trust through peer introductions was essential for gathering honest data regarding bribes and harassment.

Ethical Considerations: All participants' names have been changed (pseudonyms) to protect them from potential repercussions by local authorities, and verbal consent was obtained before each interview.

4. Findings and Discussion

The data collected from the streets of Junagadh reveals a complex social hierarchy where the "publicness" of the street is constantly negotiated. The findings are categorized into three primary sociological themes: The Architecture of Harassment, The Gendered Curb, and the Strategy of "Invisible Resistance."

1) The Architecture of Harassment: JMC and the "Cleansing" Narrative

In Junagadh, the municipal authorities (Junagadh Municipal Corporation) operate under a narrative of "Encroachment Removal." This is often intensified during the tourist season around Uparkot or religious events like the Bhavnath Fair.

- **Systemic Uncertainty:** Vendors reported that harassment is not consistent but episodic. This "unpredictable policing" serves as a tool of social control, keeping vendors in a state of constant anxiety.
- **The "Hafta" System:** Beyond formal fines, an informal tax (hafta) exists. Sociologically, this represents a "shadow governance" where the state's agents (police and local officials) recognize the vendors' right to exist only through private financial extraction.

2) The Gendered Curb: Vulnerability and Exclusion

The streets of Junagadh are highly gendered spaces. Female vendors, often selling vegetables or traditional handicrafts near the pilgrimage sites, face a double marginalization.

- **Safety and Stigma:** While male vendors can occupy the streets late into the night, women are forced to retreat by dusk due to safety concerns and social perceptions of "propriety."
- **Lack of Facilities:** The absence of public toilets and shaded resting areas in Junagadh disproportionately affects women vendors, forcing them into shorter working hours and lower profit margins compared to their male counterparts.

3) "Invisible Resistance": Social Capital as a Survival Tool

- Despite their precarity, vendors are not passive victims. They exercise agency through what James C. Scott calls "everyday forms of resistance."
- **Information Networks:** Vendors in Kalwa Chowk have developed sophisticated "early warning systems." A single phone call or shout can trigger a rapid dispersal of carts minutes before a municipal van arrives.
- **Kinship Ties:** Many vending spots in Junagadh are "inherited" through generations. These informal property rights are recognized by other vendors, even if the law considers them illegal. This creates a "moral economy" of the street that operates parallel to the official legal system.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The sociological problems of street vendors in Junagadh are not merely economic; they are crises of citizenship and space. The current urban policy treats the vendor as an "obstacle" to be removed rather than a "partner" in the city's growth.

6. Summary of Findings

The study concludes that the "Social Precarity" of Junagadh's vendors is a result of **Structural Violence**. By denying them permanent vending zones and legal protection, the city forces them into a cycle of debt and displacement. However, the resilience shown through social capital indicates that the informal economy is a robust social network that provides more security than the state currently offers.

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