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Hawkers, Footpaths and the City: Informality, Urban Space, and Life in Kolkata

Madhumita Roy

Professor, Department of Architecture, Jadavpur University
ORCHID iD:0000-0003-1858-8060

Abstract: ***Street vendors are not marginal figures in Kolkata but agents who shape public spaces, enliven streets, and influence the city's social and spatial character. This paper draws from urban theory, political economy, ethnography, and archival sources to trace the historical evolution of street hawking. It shows how hawkers' responses to regulatory pressure, spatial constraints, and market demand have led to the creative and persistent occupation of the sidewalk, transit node, and neighborhood market. This study warns that there are significant differences among deprived communities; hence, it is wrong to assume that the same policy will work for all deprived communities. This is because the poor and the economically well-off often compete for urban space and resource allocation. This paper examines the historical evolution, socio-spatial dynamics, and governance of street hawking in Kolkata. Drawing on urban theory, policy documents, archival materials, and existing empirical studies, it investigates how hawkers negotiate regulatory pressures, spatial constraints, and market demands while sustaining livelihoods in contested public spaces. The study analyses the National Policy on Urban Street Vendors (2009) and the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act (2014), highlighting the contradictions between legal recognition and everyday governance. The findings show that street vending is a structural component of Kolkata's urban economy and public life rather than a temporary or marginal activity. The paper argues that inclusive urban planning should recognize vending as a legitimate urban function and integrate it into participatory spatial planning frameworks that promote urban citizenship and spatial justice.***

Keywords: Street Vendors, Hawkers, Kolkata, Informality, Urban Governance, Public Space, Right to the City, Spatial Justice, Planning.

1. Introduction

1.1 The Street as a Site of Struggle

Kolkata was the capital of British India and is currently the capital of West Bengal. It has always been a city of streets and the stage of everyday life. From Chowringhee's footpaths to the Gariahat and Dharmatala bazaars, the street is not just an infrastructural conduit but a social institution. At the heart of this street life is the hawker selling fish, vegetables, *chai*, *puchka*, garments, books and so many more things from a simple mat, a basket or a stall. The hawker holds a contradictory place in the city psyche. The phrase "a few hawkers" refers to the wide variety of traditional street vendors selling a broad assortment of items and offering services from a footpath-based stall, for example, tea, food, clothing, mobile phone accessories, and so on. In contrast, mainstream and elite discourses often construct hawkers as encroachers, nuisances, and hindrances to urban modernity. The hawker question hinges on the difference between valuing hawkers culturally and excluding them bureaucratically.

The paper is divided into nine sections. First, hawking has a long and rich history in India (Section 3). Secondly, a close analysis of the socio-economic profile of hawkers today, including caste, class, gender, and migration (Section 4). Thereafter, the spatial politics of pavements and zones of exclusion (Section 5). Moreover, the legal and policy framework, including the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 (Section 6). Subsequently, political organisation and trade unions (Section 7). Further, planning interventions (Section 8). Also, a framing of the question in post-colonial urban theory (Section 9). Finally, some conclusions.

1.2 Role of Urban Planners

Street vendors are placed in contested urban spaces that place planners in a critical yet contradictory position. Planning interventions in Kolkata has been an uneasy balance between forced eviction and half-hearted regularization and has not integrated vendors into the spatial. The Kolkata Municipal Corporation and the Town Vending Committee have been put in place under the Street Vendors Act of 2014 whose task is to demarcate the vending zones and issue vending certificates. However, the implementation is slow and politically fraught. An approach to planning that could make cities more just would rely on participatory methods, mapping vendor clusters, understanding the micro-geographies of trade, and the design of streets that accommodate vending like any legitimate urban function.

2. Methodology and Conceptual Framework

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design. It analyses existing ethnographies, sociological surveys, legal documents, and policy texts rather than generating primary data. Sources were selected for their empirical rigour and relevance to urban informality in India, principally the works of Chatterjee (2004), Roy (2003, 2011), Gooptu (2001), and Bandyopadhyay (2009, 2016), supplemented by institutional data from NSS, KMDA, NASVI, and SEWA. The analytical approach triangulates three theoretical frameworks: Lefebvre's (1991) right to the city, Chatterjee's (2004) political society, and the political economy of informality as theorised by Davis (2006) and Breman (2010) to read street hawking as simultaneously an economic, social, spatial, and political practice. The study's principal limitations are its reliance on secondary sources, its geographic concentration on Kolkata, the enumeration gaps inherent in institutional datasets, and unresolved tensions between its theoretical

frameworks. The diagram traces the study's logic from top to bottom; research design feeds into source selection, which informs three theoretical lenses that converge into a synthesis, with limitations flagged at the close.

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3. Historical Origins of Hawking in Kolkata

i) Pre-Colonial and Early Colonial Roots

Photo 1: A hawker on the footpath of Writers' Buildings, Kolkata in and around 1940

Source: webpage http://oldsite.library.upenn.edu/etext/sasia/calcutta1947/? Monday, 16-Jun-2003 / Reproduced by courtesy of David N. Nelson, South Asia Bibliographer, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania)

Kolkata street vending history dates back to before British arrival. The villages *Sutanuti, Govindapur* and *Kalikata* acquired by Job Charnock and the East India Company in 1690 were already part of a pre-existing web of rural markets and periodic bazaars (*haat*). Markets of this sort brought cultivators, artisans and traders together into social infrastructures of commerce. Colonial urbanism would transform these but not erase them (Bhattacharya, 1987). As colonial city expansion of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries took place, huge demands for domestic labour and petty services emerged. Heavy influx of migrants coming from Bihar, Orissa and Bengal's districts took place as many found jobs as porters, domestic servants, and hawkers (Photo 1 and 2). As a structural necessity, the colonial city created its informal economy even while passing laws against it. The Police Act of 1861 and various municipal by-laws empowered officials to remove hawkers from designated streets; they criminalized street trade, and such criminalization continued even through the post-colonial period (Gooptu, 2001). The colonial government frequently collided with the hawker community. The European authorities, while relying on cheap services that hawkers offered, including the delivery of food, milk, newspapers, and other goods, to their house-holds, viewed them as agents of disorder and sanitary peril. The hawkers thus get constructed as both necessary and undesirable as they are never entirely legitimated or removable (Bandyopadhyay, 2009).

Photo 2:Lt Richard Beard, US Army Lieutenant Psychologist by a hawker in Calcutta,

Source: Elaine Pinkerton / Reproduced by courtesy of Elaine Pinkerton

ii) The Late Colonial and Nationalist Period

Hawking intertwined with nationalist politics in the late colonial era. The Swadeshi movement, which occurred in the years of 1905 – 1908 after the partition of Bengal, encouraged the indigenous traders and artisans to a great extent. Many of these people were selling homemade goods just to spread the message of boycotting British manufactured goods. The hawker became a symbol of economic nationalism for a brief period. However, this valorization was a selective one. It did not extend to lower-caste and migrant communities selling British goods (Sarkar, 1973).The Partition of 1947 saw the arrival of massive Hindu refugees. These were refugees from East Pakistan. By the early 1950s, Kolkata was home to hundreds of thousands of displaced persons. Many of these individuals took to hawking as a survival mechanism, leading to a massive expansion of street vending. According to Chatterji (2007), the refugee hawker of postcolonial Kolkata was simultaneously a subject of sympathy and a governance problem.

iii) The Left Front Era (1977–2011)

With the election of the Left Front government in 1977, a new political context arose for hawkers. The hawkers were organized by the CPI-M's trade union, the left political machine, which promised to protect them from eviction in return for votes. Nonetheless, party structures were used to distribute hawker licenses and pitches, creating a patronage system that secured livelihoods and generated rents for party middlemen. The left never truly protected hawkers for redistributive ends alone but always political ones. Nonetheless, Kolkata's pavement economy grew considerably during the 2000s, and hawkers became an informal constituency in urban politics (Chatterjee, 2004; Roy, 2003).

4. The Socioeconomic Profile of Kolkata's Hawkers

i) Scale and Composition

Determining how many hawkers operate in Kolkata is methodologically difficult because the boundaries of who counts are fluid: registered vendors, quasi-permanent stallholders, and entirely mobile sellers. According to the National Sample Survey (NSS) 2011–12, about 93 per cent of total employment in urban West Bengal was in the informal sector. Street vendors are a highly visible subgroup within this broad category. According to the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority, the number 150,000-400,000 has been used on various occasions to refer to the number of vendors operational in the metropolitan district at different times. The estimates are quite different and dependent on the definition of a 'hawker' and the methodology used (KMDA, 2005; NASVI, 2012).

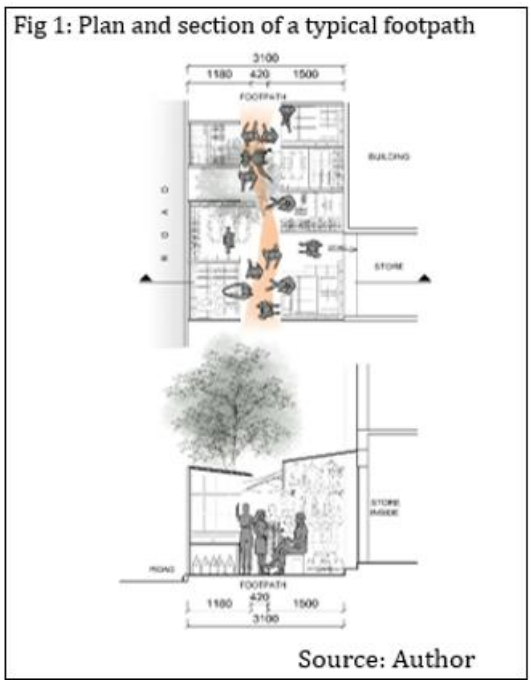
Street vendors in Kolkata are not a uniform group. There are differences in the goods they sell, spatial mobility (stationary versus mobile), security of pitch, access to capital as well as a host of social characteristics like caste, religion, gender and place of origin. Food vendors selling fish, vegetables, cooked snacks, *chaa* (M.Roy, 2012), and fruit are the single largest category, followed by garment vendors, book and stationery sellers, electronics and mobile accessories vendors, and service providers like cobblers, barbers, and tailors. Almost

everywhere in Kolkata the existence of these colourful hawkers on footpaths and streets is visible (Photo 3).

Photo 3: Hawkers displaying products appears to be very vibrant and colourful while walking through the footpaths

Source: Author

Fig 1: Plan and section of a typical footpath



Source: Author

Figure 1 presents the typical details of a footpath and indicates that the design provides a narrow 400 mm space for pedestrian movement, permitting only one person to pass at a time.

ii) Caste, Class, and Migration

The hawkers in Kolkata belong to different castes. This reflects the Bengali social structure of the city and its history. Numerous fish and vegetable vendors in the city are from lower-OBC (Other Backward Class) and Scheduled Caste communities. For these groups, hawking has not only been an economic necessity but also, historically, an identity bound to an occupation. The informal economy comprises distinct classes of economic agents such as the baishnab fish-sellers, lower-caste vegetable hawkers and scheduled-caste composition of cobblers and waste-pickers which are partly socially arranged by caste (Bhattacharya, 1987).

Migration is another central axis of the social composition of hawker population. Kolkata has always been a city of migrants and the city's hawker economy proves that. The hawkers belong mostly to migrants from rural West Bengal. Specifically, they have come from the districts of Murshidabad, North 24 Parganas and Malda. Many come from Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh and Orissa. This is a challenge because these migrants tend to occupy the most precarious pitches with the lowest margins and the most dangerous forms of mobile vending (Bandyopadhyay, 2016). They are often without papers, leaving them open to police harassment, while also being off the radar of policymakers.

iii) Gender and Hawking

Kolkata's female vendors happen to be quite vulnerable. Women have always been engaged in petty trade selling vegetables, flowers and cooked food in local markets or on the pavements. This group tends to concentrate in the least secure, least profitable and most spatially marginal niches of the hawker economy. They have low representation on formal hawker organizations and trade unions, limited access to credit and capitals, and are disproportionate victims of harassment from police, landlords, and male competitors (SEWA, 2013).

A research conducted by the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Kolkata has revealed that women hawkers face multiple discrimination. These include denial of licenses, police and touts' extortion, sexual harassment and difficulties of combining market work and domestic work. Hawkers' organizations and self-help groups (SHGs) have attempted to gain recognition for their rights and entitlements. At the same time, women hawkers have shown considerable resilience and organizational capacity, and the growth of self-help groups and microfinance networks among women vendors has provided alternative forms of economic security in some localities (SEWA, 2013).

5. Footpaths, Space, and the Politics of Hawking in Kolkata

i) The Footpath as Urban Space

The footpath is not just a marginal strip of pavement, it is a basic planning element which influences liveability with equity, safety and sustainability of urban settlement (partnership, 2025). Over the years, footpaths have evolved from prehistoric trails to legal rights of way. Likewise, their use is an essential part of urban life. Footpaths remain sadly undervalued in planning practice despite this centrality. Although often regarded as critical transport infrastructure, an absence of design which embraces the entire bridge (that is the bridge deck and the bridge supports) limits safety, sense of place and pedestrian usability (Photo 4).

Photo 4: History of footpath

Source: https://walkingthewolds.co.uk

The design of sidewalks really informed how people work through the city and experience the city. When we invest in good pedestrian infrastructure, people walk & cycle more, do not use cars & also save money. Studies show that vibrant pedestrian streets have managed to boost retail sales by 15-20 % due to higher foot-fall. Footpaths also connect people to essential services like schools, parks, and public transport. Jan Gehl's thesis on walkability relied on four conditions, namely convenience, safety, comfort, and attractiveness. The interaction between building frontages and footpaths is architecture-related and equally decisive. Varying building heights, spacing between entrances, transparent and landscaped frontages help break the scale of the block making the distance walked feel shorter. It also contributes to the experience of moving through the urban environment.

ii) The Geography of Hawking

Hawker locations in the city are not random. The spatial distribution of hawkers follows a logic that is hard to decode, but it closely follows the demands on the market and the transport network. It is conditioned by the historical evolution of land-use and the politics of pitch allotment. Hawkers can be found in almost every locality beyond these major nodes. Kolkata's socio-spatial geography is marked by the *para* (neighborhood) market which comprises a cluster of pavement stalls selling fresh fruit, cooked food, and daily essentials. Both economically and socially important as spaces of everyday interaction, these markets provide low- and middle-income households with access to goods at affordable prices (Chatterjee, 2004).

iii) The Politics of Footpath Space and Ownership

The streets in Kolkata are public infrastructure, living area and market. The hawker's pitch is said to have multiple uses it coexists with the commuter's route, the chai shop's extension, the political party's hoarding. Thus, the pavement governance is innately political involving ward councillors, police, party workers and organized crime. Scholars such as Chatterjee (2004) and Bandyopadhyay (2009) have recorded these governance systems. Hawker pitches are not freely available; rather, it is the party workers who act as intermediaries and distribute them through patronage networks. Vendors pay party representatives informal tolls *tola* for the right to occupy a pitch a significant informal tax on petty trade that constitutes exploitation, but also protection. The municipal body is the custodian and not the owner of the footpaths of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) jurisdiction. It holds them as a public trustee. The Municipal Commissioner can take action against illegal street sales, and the police can act against obstructive vendors. However, there is a well-known underground economy. The illegally occupying hawkers in locations like Gariahat, Esplanade, Hatibagan, New Market are acquired, sold and inherited through the politically connected middlemen. Being prime pitches, they sell for several lakhs of rupees through entirely informal transactions (Fig 2).

Fig 2: Price range of stalls in different locations in Kolkata

Source: https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/ Jun 28, 2024, 04:27 IST /Saikat Ray

Saikat Ray's TOI report mentions, *"Most hawkers do not have the means to buy stalls. The investment is done by affluent and influential individuals with political connections. The stalls are then rented out to hawkers. In New Market, the rent for a 35 sq ft stall is Rs 10,000-Rs 12,000 a month, in CBD Rs 8,000-Rs 10,000, in Gariahat Rs 6,000-Rs 8,000 and in Hatibagan Rs 4,000-Rs 6,000," said another hawker union leader. If the investor wishes to later sell the stall to another person, he collects the salami at the going rate to make good his investment."*

The act of 2014 recognized vending to be a legitimate livelihood and sanctioned vending through certificates and Town Vending Committees. However, it did not clearly delineate spatial rights on the footpaths. The Act's recognition of the vendor without defining the space has, in effect, entrenched conditions under which informal pitch trading thrives. The outcome is a layered governance structure where there is formal legal authority, municipal power, political patronage, and informal market transactions that are each partially legitimate but none wholly sovereign. Eviction drives brings tension to the surface. When the Chief Minister directed in June 2024 the footpath clearance of the entire Kolkata and Salt Lake, the structures were brought down by earthmovers without any prior TVC consultation, which was illegal. Nevertheless, within a span of weeks, traders had once again occupied the same pitches. The dynamic of eviction and reoccupation is not merely an enforcement failure; it reveals a deeper, unresolved question regarding who has effective

control over the footpaths in Kolkata and under what conditions the urban poor may occupy public space.

iv) Eviction, Beautification, and the New Urban Aesthetic

Citizens generally desire a clean and aesthetically pleasing urban environment. Consequently, when a city appears shabby, informal, or poorly designed, it can negatively influence public perception (Photo 5) . Since the end of the 1990s, hawkers have been evicted from central and commercially important areas in Kolkata. The middle-class demand for 'clean' and 'modern' streets, pressure from formal retailers, court orders in response to PILs from resident associations and the overall desire to create a globally competitive urban image have driven these. The most significant drive happened after Supreme Court's October 2004 order asking the KMC to clear footpaths and provide alternative sites. Implementation on a partial basis through hawker plazas and multi-storey relocation structures was mostly counter-productive. The sites to which hawkers were relocated were generally too far away from the consumer flows that made the original pitches economically viable (Roy, 2011). The political economy of eviction reveals the class dimensions of urban governance. Commercial districts that are upscale are spared from drives. But the impact of these drives is disproportionately on the most marginalised hawkers, migrants, women, undocumented or non-partisan. In other words, while those with powerful patrons negotiate their way back, the most hapless are at the receiving end. Selective enforcement is not a governance failure, Roy (2011) argues, but its distinctive mode: the very ability to decide who may be exempted from the rule is a political power in itself.

Photo 5: As the rows of hawkers appears from outside

Source: https://www.millenniumpost.in/bengal/kolkata-civic-body-police-jointly-remove-plastic-sheets-from-gariahat-hawker-zone-544184

v) Footpaths and Public Psychology

Kolkata's sidewalks are cracked, uneven, and perpetually bustling. The pavement is almost half occupied by hawkers, phone cables dangle from makeshift stalls, *chai* carts appear out of nowhere yet once you sit down, the chaos is a mirage. Accidents seldom happen, corrections are innate, and the city moves on. At once living room, market and stage, footpath is a space. A particularly noteworthy point is the duality in pedestrian behavior. The same person who, while having a good time and taking it easy, walks along a footpath, finds it to be a distraction when in a hurry. A footpath does not change; only the attitude of the person walking it does.

6. Legal and Policy Framework

i) The National Policy on Urban Street Vendors (2009)

India's National Policy on Urban Street Vendors, 2009 was released by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation and marked the turning point in the official framing of street vending. The vendors were recognised as not encroachers but as economic actors providing essential services whose livelihoods deserve protection for the first time at the national level. The policy mandated conducting a census of vendors, earmarking of vending zones, issuance of identity cards, setting up of Town Vending Committees (TVCs) having vendor representation and provisioning of basic amenities at vending sites (Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, 2009). While largely welcomed by hawker organizations and civil society, its implementation at the level of state and city was highly uneven. Kolkata saw a partial and slow evolution in translating policy into practice as the hawker census was left incomplete, identity cards were issued selectively and TVCs nominally constituted but didn't function as intended. According to a report published by NASVI in 2012, the persistence of informal pitch allocation systems and police extortion, along with the formal policy

framework, demonstrated the futility of reforming informal governance through a top-down mechanism.

ii) The Street Vendors Act (2014)

The 2009 Policy received legal recognition owing to the 2014 enactment of the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act. The right of existing vendors to trade was ensured, harassment and eviction were prohibited without due process, requiring TVCs to include representation from at least 40 percent vendors, including one-third women, demarcation of vending and no-vending zones and grievance redressal mechanisms (Government of India, 2014).

Kolkata has witnessed troubled implementation of legislation touted as a game changer. West Bengal was late in framing rules under the Act and TVCs have been often co-opted by political interests instead of being authentic participatory bodies. With ongoing rural-urban migration, identifying genuine vendors from new entrants has been practically as well as politically impossible. Perhaps more fundamentally, the Act does not address the structural conditions that drive hawking – inadequate formal employment, weak social security, and unequal distribution of urban land (Roy, 2011; NASVI, 2012).

iii) Court Orders and the Contradictions of Judicial Governance

There is a prominent role of judiciary in India's hawking regulation. Public Interest Litigations initiated by middle-class resident welfare associations have resulted in court orders requiring municipal bodies to clear footpaths. This reflects how property-owning urban residents frame hawkers as threats to civic order who cannot make legitimate spatial claims. According to Mehta (2007), the judicialization of politics refers to how fundamentally political questions about the distribution of urban resources are displaced to legal arenas. The pressure of rights frameworks tends to favour the propertied and the literate. Court orders are directed towards municipal corporations, but the actual governance of hawker spaces is fragmented and controlled by a large number of informal intermediaries party workers, police, touts largely invisible to any judicial gaze (Chatterjee, 2004).

7. Political Organization and the Hawker Movement

i) Trade Unions and Party Politics

Hawkers in Kolkata have a long-standing political organization with roots in left politics in West Bengal. During the Left Front period, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), affiliated with the CPI-M, was the leading hawker organization. Trade unions linked to the CITU arranged vendors from various commodity categories, maintained membership registers, and intervened with municipal authorities on behalf of hawkers, as well as furnished protection from arbitrary eviction in exchange for electoral and organizational support to the CPI-M.

The political transition in 2011 when the Trinamool Congress (TMC) defeated the Left Front after 34 years in power brought changes for hawker organizations. As CPI-M networks weakened and the TMC consolidated its urban poor base, hawkers' political affiliations changed rapidly. Citu unions were displaced by trinamool-affiliated organisations across much of the city and the same pattern of patronage-mediated allocation of pitches was reproduced under new political patronage. This trend indicates that the hawkers' organization in Kolkata has got embedded in the party-political structure rather than having a self-sufficient social movement.

ii) The National Alliance of Street Vendors of India (NASVI)

Along with political-affiliated unions, civil society organizations have tried to organize street vendors more independently. The National Alliance of Street Vendors of India (NASVI) is formed in 1998. It is one of the most important. Through a national vendor movement and progressive lobbying accompanied by research and advocacy documents for street vendors, NASVI has linked Indian street vendors with international solidarity networks including StreetNet International. NASVI, together with local organizations in Kolkata, has trained vendors on their rights, documented evictions and harassment and built organizational capacities outside the party-political framework. Although the Peoples Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) has made attempts to unionize informal workers like hawkers, these efforts have had limited impact primarily due to the presence of party-affiliated unions representing various interests, the diversity among hawkers in terms of location and goods sold, and the challenge of ensuring sustained autonomous worker organizations. This poses inherent difficulties when the principal survival strategy of informalization workers is primarily individualized negotiations with political patrons and not the collective assertion of rights.

iii) Gender and Organization

The lack of women's representation in hawkers' associations is consistent with their under-representation in trade unions and political parties. Women street vendors often find themselves marginalized. They are frequently not included in informal gatherings where issues like pitch allocations are discussed. They are also not part of union leadership structures. Similarly, they are not part of the male solidarity networks that are vital for ensuring day-to-day protection.

Several organizations like SEWA have been fighting this exclusion by creating women-only groups and pushing for gender-sensitive policies in the Street Vendors Act like one-third women's reservation in Town Vending Committees. Kolkata's hawker movement taken together are major organizational capacity of a socially and economically marginalized group. Simultaneously, they also reflect structural constraints that so far have kept that organization largely over-reliant on party patron-clientelism than to evolve into a more transformative, rights-based movement.

8. Interventions by Planners and Government

i) Operation Sunshine (1996): The Clearance Approach

A dramatic intervention by planners, which happened to be an official one, was Operation Sunshine, launched by the Left Front government in November 1996 under MIC Shri Subhas Chakraborty. Thousands of hawker stalls were destroyed by municipal officers, CPI(M) cadres and a battalion of police to

beautify the city and help the pedestrians. The failure was fundamentally one of planning. Even though the West Bengal government devised rehabilitation schemes, the author who worked with KMC at that time as an architect was associated with the design of such schemes in the first phase. The initial phase comprised shops of the size 1200mm×1200mm built on KMC-owned land at Gariahat, Kasba, Behala, Baghajatin, Mirza Ghalib Street and so on. Some prominent footpaths locations were cleared and the rehabilitation excercises were taken up, however, it failed to address the actual beneficiaries properly. The Left Front's resolve broke because of mass protests. Vendors gradually returned to their old pavements while the many rehabilitated shops were occupied or sold by benefactors.

ii) Road Widening and Footpath Reduction (2004)

In 2004, then Mayor Subrata Mukherjee began an initiative to narrow footpaths on major roads to create more lanes for vehicles as wide footpaths were getting encroached upon. Although the capacity of the carriageway was improved as a result of the decision, both the pedestrian and the hawker suffered a major setback. The pavement is already under contention from many quarters and this decision has left in nowhere to go. The roads were often partitioned temporarily with moveable guard rails to create a passage for pedestrian movement (Photo).

Photo 6: Temporary pedestrian movement arrangement encroaching the road

Source: Author

iii) The Street Vendors Act, 2014 and Town Vending Committees

The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act of 2014 gave a structure to the street vending community. As per the Act, Town Vending Committees (TVCs) were to be set up involving vendor representatives, City Commissioner and professionals including sociologists and planners as experts. This meant street vendors would have a voice in city matters. The Act also recommended zoning of streets into red (no vending), amber (restricted vending) and green (designated vending zone). This was the first significant law of vendors' right to livelihood and urban space.

iv) Planning Institute Engagement (2014)

In 2014, a project occurred sponsored by the Union Ministry of the HRD with State Urban Development Department support and jointly funded by CREDAI and the Indian Chamber of Commerce for Rupees Five crores, a clutter-free hawker zone would be created in Gariahat(Photo 7). The first time an official plan of a premier planning institute, with the support of the state, formalizes hawker activity and a creative economy. It was a key part in bringing together what is taught by planning institutions and what is happening on-ground.

Photo 7: The stalls as designed

Source: https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/gariahat-hawkers-seek-time-for-new-kiosks/cid/1696068

v) KMC's Engagement with the TVC Framework

KMC's engagement with the TVC framework has been sluggish but notable. The corporation decided that no new hawkers could operate without TVC permission, and introduced the "one-third rule", registered hawkers may occupy one-third of the footpath, leaving two-thirds for pedestrians. A formal hawker policy report submitted to the Mayor identified approximately 14,000 hawkers operating in non-hawker zones without designated spots, underscoring the scale of unresolved spatial conflict

vi) Event-Driven Evictions: Salt Lake (2019) and FIFA World Cup (2017)

There is a pattern of using something very important as a reason to evict. In 2017, almost 3000 hawkers were removed from Salt Lake in the lead-up to the FIFA Under-17 World Cup to give a good look to foreigners. In January 2019, spurred by the Calcutta Book Fair to take place the next month, Bidhannagar Municipality evicted hawkers across nine tank areas. These drives consistently depict vendors as obstacles to urban order, thereby disregarding the livelihoods and economic networks that they build.

vii) Judicial Pressure and Political Volatility

Planning engagement is increasingly driven by courts. In 2017, the Calcutta High Court held that the State Government must constitute a TVC within 12 weeks because the law prescribes that that the TVC should be formed before any legal eviction. Nevertheless the political stimulus continues to override systematic planning. In June 2024, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee was displeased by encroachments on footpaths. Subsequently, on the CM's instruction, police with earthmovers launched eviction drives at Gariahat, Hatibagan, and Salt Lake without prior consultation with the Town Vending Committee (TVC).

viii) Recent Eviction Drives (2024–2026)

In June, 2024, the large-scale evictions organized in Kolkata and nearby districts were met with strong resistance that revived the conversation around the protection of livelihoods. In May 2025, a drive near Howrah Station under the Amrit Bharat project has been stayed by the Calcutta High Court which held that hawkers have to be heard before the eviction. In May 2026, the recently elected BJP government conducted one of the longest eviction drives in recent memory, this time targeting all vendors on railway premises across Howrah, Sealdah and Dum Dum stations. According to hawkers, there wasn't any prior warning. The High Court granted a partial interim stay covering Howrah Station with the next hearing on June 10 2026. To sum up, official planning engagement in Kolkata has fluctuated between top-down clearances, court-defined frameworks and official zoning attempts which lacked the participatory planner-led spatial approach on all counts that the situation warranted.

9. Urban Theory, Postcolonial Urbanism, and the Hawker Question

i) Informality and the City

The research of hawker in Kolkata opens up theoretical debates about informality in the global south. Starting in the 1970s, development economists following Keith Hart and the ILO's Kenya Report viewed the informal sector as a transitional phenomenon destined to be absorbed into the formal economy. Theories had been challenged progressively by the structuralist theorists that the informality was not a

transition but a structure of the capitalist periphery which is reproduced by the capital accumulation.

Mike Davis's thesis in his Planet of Slums which notes that a global 'informal proletariat' is the key social formation of twenty-first-century urbanism is both influential and contested. Davis's analysis is criticized for conflating diverse informal arrangements and for producing an image of the global South that is dystopian, obscuring the agency and creativity as well as the solidarity exercised by informal workers. Hawkers in Kolkata with their rich history of organizing and embedding in culture offer an account of informality that is more differentiated that takes seriously both structural constraints and social possibilities.

ii)The Right to the City in Postcolonial Context.
Many urban social movements use Henri Lefebvre's concept of the 'right to the city' to demand equal access to urban resources and spaces. In post- colonial context, however, it requires qualification. According to Ananya Roy, this cannot be justified through mainstream liberal theories of universal citizenship, as formal institutional mechanisms have historically excluded the urban poor. According to Partha Chatterjee, political society is a place where the poor assert their presence. In political society, subaltern groups negotiate with the state. Subaltern groups negotiate not as citizens with rights but as populations. Political society is abandoned for groups by the state. The state owes welfare attentions for political legitimation.

The framework he proposes reveals an order that is distinct to the politics of hawkers in Calcutta. Eviction drives are followed by a period of negotiations where some hawkers are partially reinstated. Political parties now compete with each other for the hawker vote. To appeal to them they offer protection from enforcement. Lastly, there is a formal policy that is carried out on the ground while the informal structure is in operation. However, the framework has limits. It generally takes patronage politics as given, and may underestimate the potential for more transformative claims. The Street Vendors Act of 2014, though imperfect in its implementation, is an attempt which is a shift towards a rights-based framework that goes beyond the calculus of political society.

iii) Neoliberal Urbanism and the Dispossession of the Poor
Indian cities have been increasingly shaped by "actually existing neoliberalism" since the 1990s as urban governance was being restructured around economic competitiveness, private investments and middle-class consumption. In Kolkata, the transformation is taking place through large infrastructure projects, clusters of IT and service industry, and branding of the city as an investment destination. Hawkers in commercially important locations are viewed within this framework as impediments to economic modernisation. This view feeds elite policy discourse and middle- class opinion.

The eviction of hawkers led to their dispossession. David Harvey refers to such dispossession as 'accumulation by dispossession'. Dispossession then is the forced removal of the urban poor from sites, which are valuable for operations with enhanced capital.

The pitch of the hawker in a place like Esplanade or New Market is not merely a space for the tiny individual business of the poor. But essentially, an assertion of the right of poor people to occupy central urban space, which gets evicted rendering it a market opportunity for formal retail and urban aesthetic improvement which serve and satisfy more powerful interests.

iv)Kolkata's Distinctiveness
While these trends are generally true of urbanism in India, in Kolkata this has a character of its own. Compared to hawker politics of Mumbai or Delhi, which has resulted from the predominance of the right and right-leaning parties, Calcutta's is a product of the dominance of the left and left-leaning parties and the city's particular history of settlement of migrants and refugees. Due to its relatively slower economic growth, pressure on central urban space has moderated somewhat and this scenario is changing with the emergence of Rajarhat and Salt Lake IT corridor.

Kolkata's literary and artistic culture has engaged with the lives of the urban poor to a significant degree. From Tagore's short stories to Ritwik Ghatak's films to the poetry of Sunil Gangopadhyay (Photo). Kolkata's Public Culture is More Likeable Than Others'' will be published by a leading UK academic publisher and will highlight the sympathy and solidarity of Kolkata's residents.

10. Conclusion: Hawkers, Footpaths, and the Future of the Inclusive City

The analysis yields five important conclusions towards the history, the sociology, the space planning, the legality, and the politics of street hawking in Kolkata. Street vendors contribute to the stabilization of the local market in their respective areas and aid in the cultural identity of an urban space. The temporary occupation of public space through eviction/reoccupation has been a constant feature of Kolkata's urban management over the years. This trend will persist as long as planning frameworks overlook their existence as a deviation. Nevertheless, the governance of hawking is shaped by the relation between formal recognition and informal control. The Street Vendors Act 2014 is undoubtedly a wonderful piece of legislation. However, the implementation remains patchy and continues to weaken due to patronage and informal pitch economies. In Kolkata, formal policy and informal governance have significant relations with each other. Policymakers ought to engage with this mess and not be waiting for a legislation for a legislative fix that fixes this practice on-ground. Eviction processes are not random occurrences. Expressions of political class is what they are. The street hawkers began to be removed as a result of Operation Sunshine (1996), a Supreme Court verdict (2004), and 2024 operations. These policies work for the middle-class residents and formal businesses, leaving the urban poor majority out of the picture.

The interventions as types of accumulation by dispossession (to use David Harvey's term) need to be recognized if it is to be recalled whose city is Kolkata's roads being made for in all honesty. Hawkers are not only subjects but also active political agents with considerable experience and successful history of organizing. The vendors of Kolkata have

demonstrated their phenomenal capacity for collective action; they have been forced to come together and claim their rights in large numbers since the days of the Left Front, through affiliated unions, in the struggle against displacement and eviction, through rights-based advocacy by NASVI, and through self-help networks of women vendors. The fact that this organisation has largely operated under a patronage system, is a result of structural limits, not agentic ones. The Street Vendors Act is a product, importantly, of national vendor advocacy, which could be taken as a real change in the terms of urban citizenship. The footpaths in Kolkata require a new design. The footpath is not leftover infrastructure; but rather, it is prime urban space for mobility, commerce, social interaction, and belonging. In Kolkata, the correct planning strategy will NOT start with, 'How do we remove our hawkers? Instead, it would ask the question differently. How footpath designs can ensure pedestrian movement, as well as organize vending and social life coexist in a designated space with proper design and planning approaches. Implementation of participatory spatial mapping, transparent vending zones, authentic town-vending committees, footpath design with width, continuity, and surface quality as essential components needs attention. As more metro lines emerge, so too do IT corridors and Rajarhat development in Kolkata, whether the city's hawkers are included or left behind in this growth will be a future test. The solution is not in legislations or court orders; it lies in whether planners, administrators and civil society are willing to accept that the pavement economy is a critical part of urban life which merits design interventions. It's not whether this contest will carry on, but on whose terms it will be resolved.

Street hawking in Kolkata is a long-standing and integral component of the city's economy, culture, and public life. The study demonstrates that street vendors are not peripheral actors but active participants in shaping urban space and local markets. Despite legal recognition through national policy and legislation, implementation remains constrained by informal governance structures, political mediation, and recurring conflicts over public space. The persistence of eviction and reoccupation cycles highlights the limitations of approaches that treat vending as an urban problem rather than an urban function. A more inclusive planning framework should integrate vendors into street design, participatory governance, and spatial decision-making processes. The future of Kolkata's urban development will depend on its ability to balance mobility, commerce, and social inclusion while recognizing the legitimate place of street vendors within the city.

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