

Hawkers' Movement in Kolkata, 1975-2007

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In Kolkata, pavement hawking is an everyday phenomenon and hawkers represent one of the largest, more organised and more militant sectors in the informal economy. This note documents the hawkers' movement in the city and reflects on the everyday nature of governance.

In recent years, the issue of hawkers (street vendors) occupying public space of the pavements, which should "rightfully" belong to pedestrians alone, has invited much controversy. The practice of hawking attracts critical scholarship because it stands at the intersection of several big questions concerning urban governance, government co-option and forms of resistance (Cross 1998), property and law (Chatterjee 2004), rights and the very notion of public space (Bandyopadhyay 2007), mass political activism in the context of electoral democracy (Chatterjee 2004), survival strategies of the urban poor in the context of neoliberal reforms (Bayat 2000), and so forth. As the studies on "street vendors" in different cities reveal, each city has its own histories of street vending and own ways of carrying it through a combination of crackdown resettlement and negotiation. In India, however, academic research on the phenomenon of hawking is still in its embryonic form although social activists have been writing on various issues affecting the sector (Kiswar 2005) with particular reference to the cases of Delhi and Mumbai. But in Kolkata, though hawking is an everyday phenomenon and hawkers represent one of the largest, more organised, and perhaps, more militant sectors within the informal economy, the academic literature on the subject is virtually non-existent. So an investigation of the problem specific to the context of Kolkata is the need of the hour.

In 1996, following Operation Sunshine (os), which was a move by the Left-ruled municipal corporations and the state government to forcibly remove hawkers from selected pavements in Kolkata, a very new mode of collective resistance developed and very quickly organised itself under the banner of the Hawker Sangram Committee (HSC). In the post-os phase, the HSC has been the most powerful defender of the

hawkers' cause. More than 32 street-based hawker unions, with an affiliation to the mainstream political parties other than the ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist), better known as CPI(M), constitute the body of the HSC. The CPI(M)'s labour wing, Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), has a hawker branch called "Calcutta Street Hawkers' Union" that remains outside the HSC. The present paper seeks to document the hawkers' movement in Kolkata and also the evolution of the mechanics of management of the pavement hawking on a political terrain in the city in the last three decades, with special reference to the activities of the HSC. The paper is based on the author's archival and field research on this subject.

Operation Hawker, 1975

In 1975, the representatives of Calcutta Municipal Corporation (henceforth corporation), Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA), and the public works department (PWD) jointly took a "decision" on the removal of the hawkers from the pavements of the city to give it back to the pedestrians (*The Statesman*, 21 March 1975). Before this, the state and the municipal government had made sporadic attempts to evict or resettle hawkers that yielded only contextual solutions. In 1952, for example, the then Chief Minister Bidhan Roy endeavoured to evict the book-hawkers along College Street so that the magnificent colonial architecture of Presidency College and the University of Calcutta could be visible from a distance. In order to keep a constant flow of books at a cheap price available, the teachers of Presidency College requested the chief minister not to evict the book-hawkers. The stalls thrived under middle class patronage (*Amritabazar*, 21 July 1952).

In the 1950s, however, the usual way to check encroachment was to convert erstwhile stables and wayside vacant public lands into "hawkers' corners". Thus, in 1955, Bidhan Roy gave permission to build a hawkers' corner adjacent to the "Jogubabu Bazar" and the residence of Sir Asutosh Mukherjee, in Bhawanipore region. The large stable opposite the Greek Orthodox Church in Russa Road (now Syamaprosad Mukherjee Street) was very soon converted into "Kalighat Refugee Hawkers'

The author is thankful to JU-SYLFF Programme for financing his doctoral project. He extends his thanks to Samita Sen, Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, Jayanta Sengupta, Joyashree Roy, Abhishek Basu, Ritwik Bhattacharyya, Sulagna Maitra, Bodhisattva Kar, Rajarshi Dasgupta, Partha Chatterjee, Ranjan Chakrabarti and Kunal Chattopadhyay for listening to and reading several drafts of the article along with other parts of his thesis and for suggesting improvements.

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Corner". Eviction of the hawkers became a routine act for the corporation during the 1960s with the coming of fresh refugees from East Pakistan. Immediately after the death of Roy, an eviction drive took place in the Esplanade Tram Depot (adjacent to the Central Business District (CBD)). But the evicted hawkers were soon rehabilitated near the location they had occupied (*Anandabazar*, 11 April 1962). The new rehabilitation market was named after Bidhan Roy (Bidhan Market). As this drive was backed by a sound rehabilitation scheme, it did not provoke much fracas in the city.

In 1969, during the short tenure of the United Front government, Deputy Chief Minister Jyoti Basu ordered the police to evict the hawkers at Gariahat region (the centre of the southern part of the city and a thriving retail upmarket at that time). But this drive did not materialise due to the intervention of Ballygunj Hawkers' Union dominated by the Worker's Party (*The Statesman*, 29 November 1969). In 1972, the Congress government ventured to evict the hawkers occupying the pavements across the Chowringhee (now Jawaharlal Nehru Road). Again the mission proved to be a futile one (Samaddar 1978: 49).

As mentioned, in 1975, the three wings of the government, CMDA, PWD and the corporation expressed their resolve to evict the hawkers from some of the streets of the city. The drive was officially called "Operation Hawker". What was the motive behind such a drive?

The corporation had nine retail markets in its ownership at that time. These markets were scattered in different pockets of the city. Revenue records of the municipal markets provide some clues.

Shibaprasad Samaddar, the administrator of the corporation and the mastermind of the operation, provides an account of the financial condition of all the municipal retail markets between 1965-66 and 1975-76. Samaddar's account shows that right from 1965-66 the profitability of the markets was declining. From 1971-72, these markets began to face a revenue loss. The downward trend was equally visible in the College Street market (the second largest municipal market in the city). The situation of the small markets like that of Entally, Lansdowne, New Alipore and Allen was more precarious. Only the Gariahat market

could earn a profit of Rs 1 lakh in 1975-76. Samaddar attributes this revenue loss of the markets to the "hawker menace". But before 1972, no centralised effort was undertaken to settle the hawkers' issue. In 1975, the situation of the Hogg market deteriorated further. The plight of the market (which contributed 50% of the corporation's total income from markets) might have enraged an activist administrator like Samaddar. During his tenure as corporation administrator, the CMDA came up with a plan to upgrade and extend the municipal markets. Although there were some minor differences between the two agencies in the matter of the plan, both of them agreed that before the expansion of the markets it was essential to "identify and quantify" and "if necessary to evict" the hawkers, especially in front of the legal retail markets (Samaddar 1978: 48).

The areas involved in the first phase of the proposed drive against encroachers covered Chittaranjan Avenue (from Madan Street Crossing to Lenin Sarani Junction), parts of Bentinck Street (from its crossing with R N Mukherjee Road to the junction of Lenin Sarani and Jawaharlal Nehru Road), parts of Jawaharlal Nehru Road from its crossing with the Lenin Sarani up to its crossing with Lindsay Street – and also certain portions of the Esplanade-East, from the crossing of Lenin Sarani to Old Court House Street (*Anandabazar*, 21 March 1975). The geographic area that the first phase of OH involved corresponded to the bulk of the CBD of the city. The majority of the hawkers were non-Bengali Muslims.

It was decided that a second or third phase of the "operation" would be undertaken in the Gariahat-Ballygunj, Sealdah and Shyambazaar regions, respectively, that had been the strongholds of the Bengali Hindu refugees (*Anandabazar*, 24 March 1975). It is important to note that the operation in 1972 targeted these three regions first and faced stiff resistance from the hawkers (*Anandabazar*, 21 April 1972). Although theoretically OH again targeted these areas, evidence shows that these regions had not been touched again taking into consideration the "existing political expediencies".

The "well-planned drive to clear roads and footpaths" was "successful" in the areas around the CBD skirting the wholesale area of Burrabazaar and in and around

Esplanade (*Anandabazar*, 26 March 1975). It is important to register the fact that the stalls located along the lanes inside Burrabazaar were left undisturbed. The unauthorised stalls in front of hospital walls as well as the stalls along Rashbehari Avenue, Shyambazaar and Sealdah were not destroyed flouting the earlier plan (*Anandabazar*, 8 April 1975). The selection of places where the "operation" was to be conducted thus provoked certain interrogations.

Hawkers vs Retail

If we closely look at the operation of the local economies in Kolkata, we will understand how in some regions the retail sector saved the hawkers and how in some other regions it went against the practice of hawking depending on the nature of economic activity that the two groups performed. Thus in the lanes within Burrabazaar, the hawkers were not evicted because they generally sold lower quality goods and/or those items the *mahajan* or the large retailer found it more profitable to sell through them. Even in Shyambazaar and Gariahat the hawkers often acted as "commissioned agents" to the shopkeepers. A contemporary survey by the police department attested to the fact (*Anandabazar*, 7 April 1975). For such a mutual dependence and clash of interests between the established traders and the hawkers it was difficult for the government to generate equal incentive to clear the pavement everywhere in a similar vein. Thus, a close review of the operation sites, even 32 years after the incident, reveals that the areas cleared of street traders are also the major retailing areas and markets, where the street traders had blocked the shop frontage.

Again, where the evicting authorities decided to operate the Mina Bazaar (a kind of makeshift market, blocking the roadway for a few hours at regular intervals) in select streets such as the Southern Avenue and Russell Street, the strongest resistance came from the established shops, wine shops, boutiques and restaurants (Samaddar 1978: 51).

The petitioners earned a high court injunction, in their favour, to postpone the programme of instituting Mina Bazaars in the afore-mentioned avenues for an indeterminate period of time. With this, OH

came to an abrupt end. The chief surgeon of the operation noticed with a docile look how the post-operative hazards became unmanageable (*Anandabazar*, 11 April 1975).

The efforts to recover the pavements from the hawkers since 1969 up to OH in 1975 had two very enduring implications for the city's political history. The anti-eviction drives gave the hawkers a greater cohesion cutting across socio-ethnic lines and brought them under greater politics, both right and the left. Let me elaborate on this.

Given the political situation in 1975, it was difficult for the hawkers to unite themselves under the left unions as most of the left leaders were absconding to avoid jail sentence, murder and harassment. Their strategy was to forge solidarity among themselves using the strings of the Congress flag, hailing Indira Gandhi and clandestinely maintaining relations with the left leaders. Let me quote three captions that got currency in the anti-eviction drive: (a) "Hawkers of the World Unite", (b) *Goriber debota Indira Gandhi jindabab* ("Long live the poor's goddess, Indira Gandhi"), and (c) "Kill poverty and not the poor" (*The Statesman*, 24 March 1975).

The hawkers decided to open their shops on 24 March but declared they would remain quiet if the police turned up to remove them or confiscate the goods (*ibid*). They, however, kept on appealing to the conscience of the general public. The anti-OH move gradually took a communal overtone. The Muslim League was quick to take up the issue. In traditional Muslim neighbourhoods like Park Circus and Khidirpur, the League spearheaded strong public sentiment in favour of the evicted hawkers and in some of the wall-posters the government was criticised for a "Hindu bias" (*Jugantar*, 2 May 1975). The drive was abandoned before the start of its more problematic second phase.

Hawkers' Movement, 1977-96

In the initial years of the Left Front government, CPI(M) wanted to maintain a status quo with regard to the question of the urban vote bank. Its initial strategy was to consolidate the existing incumbency without a further radicalisation of the urban poor. Being in government, the party had begun to understand the difficulty to satisfy its heterogeneous clients. So the realist step

for the party was to consolidate benefit distribution through its affiliated labour unions by restricting new membership after 1977. Consequently, the government declared that no hawker, who had occupied the pavement after 1977, would be given the vending licence. The implication of such a declaration was that if somebody violated the norm, then he would not be granted a resettlement when an eviction would take place in future. In other words, the new strategy of the government and the party was to tighten control over the existing mobilised groups by giving them patronage but restricting their proliferation further. All the policies relating to the hawkers up to 1996 undertaken by the government of West Bengal took 1977 as the benchmark year (Sur 1978: xvii). In 1983, the then Chief Minister Jyoti Basu ordered the police officials to take necessary actions to identify and evict the post-1977 entrants on the pavement (*The Statesman*, 8 July 1983). In 1986, the committee on petition presented in the ninth legislative assembly a "Report in the matter of framing suitable laws for controlling and regulating the unauthorised occupation of public lands and thoroughfares by the hawkers and others in this state" (West Bengal legislative assembly 1986). The committee then sought not to evict the hawkers but to chalk out a proper regulatory/control mechanism to check their further proliferation. The proposal of reform included the recommendation of creation of hawking and non-hawking zones in the city. The report also recommended the rehabilitation of the hawkers in low cost market complexes.

Again, in 1989, the Municipal Consultative Committee emphasised the need to have some sort of a realist solution. The minute of the said committee resolved:

Hawkers are there on the streets and footpaths of Calcutta and possibly they will remain... To have a practical solution on the subject, it is considered that at best we think of maintaining some discipline in this affair so that minimum disturbance is created for pedestrians or carriageways, keeping the existence of hawkers and shops (Calcutta Municipal Consultative Committee, 1989: II-III).

In the first two decades of left rule, thus, hawking was seen as a flexible strategy to manage urban poverty (note that the above-mentioned statement registers

the fact that hawking is not a transitory phenomenon). Each of the petitions and policy reports thus relates to hawking as an inevitable fallout of urban poverty aggravated by the refugee influx.

In the mid-1990s, however, "the tide turned". Eager to regain the support of the urban middle classes, the communist-led government of West Bengal made an all-out effort to make Bengal a safe investment destination. As a part of urban restructuring, in 1996, over a period of two weeks, in a well-planned and coordinated action called "Operation Sunshine", municipal authorities and the police demolished all street-side stalls in Kolkata. In 1997, the state legislature brought about an amendment to the Kolkata Municipal Act that declared any form of unauthorised occupation of streets and pavements by hawkers a cognisable and non-bailable offence (*The Calcutta Gazette*, 19 November 1997). But, within a few months the hawkers began to reclaim their previous positions mobilised by their unions, opposition party and even by the smaller constituents of the ruling Left Front (*Newsweek*, 28 July 1997). The government had to think again of "regulation" of hawking as opposed to eviction and rehabilitation.

Formation of the HSC

With the official declaration of Operation Sunshine, the non-CITU hawker unions (32 in number) decided to form the HSC. The Calcutta Street Hawkers' Union being an offshoot of CITU remained away from the federation. HSC and CITU took two different strategies to counter the operation. For obvious reasons CITU could not directly confront the state. Its leaders used to make intimidating comments against the transport minister (*The Telegraph*, 4 October 1996). Again, when they found it threatening as the high command backed the operation they used to flatly deny the charge (*The Telegraph*, 24 December 1996).

The HSC, on the other hand, took a confrontational path. As the operation progressed, the HSC staged daily protests stopping traffic at key intersections, burning buses, "gherao"ing police posts and moving to the court seeking a redressal (HSC 2006: 1-7).

os was followed by selective rehabilitation of the evicted hawkers. This rehabilitation process was thoroughly controlled

by the CPI(M) leaders and marked by personalised calculations of local power by regime functionaries (*Anandabazar*, 23 January 1997). Still it was seen that hawkers had come back even in those streets which the government banned as non-hawking zones. The HSC had been thoroughly successful in projecting this comeback as the victory of its sangram.

Functions of the HSC

In the decade following 0s, which saw no major eviction-operation, the HSC's sangram has transmuted into a new form in which the state and the HSC have come to constitute each other. Keeping administrative and electoral necessities in consideration, the state and the ruling party have come close to the organisation. The HSC, today, is to be kept in full confidence before implementing any regulation on hawkers. It enjoys enormous authority in managing the informal labour market and other informal transactions related to hawking and issues of governance. To establish the point let me identify how the HSC serves its clients:

- Ensuring credits from informal bankers. The HSC acts as the guarantor.¹ Negotiating with the lower rung of the city administration. The HSC, in connection with the lower rung of the bureaucracy fixes the amount of weekly bribe that a hawker is required to pay.² (Settling conflicts among the hawkers themselves and other informal groups on the pavement. The HSC controls the “buying” and “selling” of the pavement plots and allots space for pavement dwellers, vagabonds and beggars.)³
- Regulating the number of hawkers who can operate in a given area. While it prevents the entry of newcomers in order to ensure that business-profitability is not endangered, it also accommodates fresh entry if business is doing well in a particular area.

Outsourcing of Documentation

Foucault (1991) reminds us how political regimes, since the 17th century, have used enumerative techniques or censuses to count, classify, and thereby, govern populations. Constituting the core of the state archive, the census provides the key governmental machine of intervention. It is this governmental exigency that has brought the state and the HSC close to each other.

The specific operation of the HSC in the market and in the governmental space requires it to undertake scientific documentation as well. The success of the HSC lies in the fact that it has been able to convince the policymakers that without its intervention it is impossible to have reliable data on hawking and that by virtue of its pre-existing knowledge it can offer information to the state, for a policy, at low cost. In 2006, the HSC came up with a baseline socio-economic survey and presented the document to the corporation for policy intervention in the sector (HSC 2006).

In 2007, the corporation took the initiative of creating an official database on the hawkers operating in the public spaces of the city as per the recommendation of the National Policy of the Street Vendors (2004) that called for a case-sensitive management of hawking. Based on the baseline survey of the HSC, the corporation proposed to undertake an ambitious project of documenting pavement-hawking all over the city. The project was given to a voluntary organisation called Pratibandhi Udyog. Earlier, this organisation had provided its technical expertise to the HSC to conduct the afore-mentioned baseline survey. The proprietor of the organisation, Sujit Mukherjee, known for his close relations with the incumbent mayor of the corporation and the HSC, bagged the project and elaborated the earlier survey by taking individual neighbourhoods and streets. The first survey report on Rashbehari Avenue and Gariahat Road came out in 2007 (Pratibandhi Udyog 2007). This documentation is the product of the collaboration between the corporation and the HSC. Sujit Mukherjee played the role of the hinge person between the two stakeholders.

Conclusions

To summarise, this article traces how, in Kolkata, the struggle around the hawkers' question over more than three decades has given birth to a regime of governance that can be termed as the “state-union complex” – a system where there ceases to be any clear-cut distinction between the state, the movement and the union. The HSC has currently acquired certain governmental functions such as maintaining order on the pavement, ensuring discipline among hawkers, making them amenable to certain

regulations, conducting ethnographic surveys to make hawkers visible in the policy circle, and so forth. The sangram is co-opted by the state and the committee is the prism through which the ordinary hawker perceives the state.

Jonathan Anjaria argued in the context of Mumbai that, “the experience of the hawkers in Mumbai, as elsewhere in India, have taught them not to fear a regulatory state, but a predatory one, a state that constantly demands bribes and threatens demolition, against which a licence provides security” (Anjaria 2006: 2140). So in Anjaria's version, the hawkers perceive a system of “proper” regulation as the panacea to their problems, and therefore, Anjaria suggests a systemic reform through formalisation which will provide an exemption from everyday extortion. But Anjaria does not tell us whether there is a consensus among the stakeholders on the question of the kind of regulation. As our study shows, this is the question that has propelled the hawkers' movement in Kolkata since 1977.

NOTES

- 1 Interview with Shaktiman Ghosh, general secretary, HSC, recorded by the author on 20 January 2006.
- 2 Interviews of hawkers in various parts of the city recorded by the author between January 2006 and March 2007.
- 3 Author's observation in the field.

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