

# **Changing spatial practices and Everyday Negotiations: A Study of Hawkers in Kolkata**

## **Introduction**

The neo-liberal envisioning of cities and the accompanying hyper-commodification of land and new forms of social marginalisation have increased precarity among migrant labour, severely impairing their ability to negotiate the city space and society at large. This paper, therefore, seeks to examine the different kinds of negotiation that is taking place between the new and old migrants, in three vending zones in Kolkata such as Gariahat, Hatibagan and Esplanade, in terms of using street as physical space to practice their livelihood and the role of middle class associations. Though playing a critical role in the neo-liberal restructuring of urban space, the migrants have been targeted by state agencies and sections of civil society, who find it difficult to accommodate them within the physical, social, political and cultural spaces of the city. The city is presented as a contested space and the livelihood practice of vending as one that is the site of emergent politics between new and old migrants.

## **Globalisation, Migration and the City**

Long distance migration came into being as a special case like specialised jobs, technical education or adventure etc. The volume of migration increases with the rate of development of industry and commerce. Direction of migration is generally from agricultural to industrial areas. Rural areas having less job opportunities, low per capita income, low standard of living and less developed infrastructure, motivate people to migrate to the industrial areas with better facilities. It is because these areas require labourers and as well as professionals who are not locally available. Migration occurs through a series of stages rather than in one long move and peoples'

movements are bilateral and migration differentials (for example gender, social class and age) influence a person's movement.

Migration is a complex phenomenon because of its extreme diversity, in terms of forms, process, actors, motivation, socio-economic and cultural contexts and so on. Uneven distribution of population and unbalanced utilisation of resources and variation in economic and cultural developments have influenced the movement of individuals from one region to another. Smith (1960) has linked the concept of migration to changes in physical space. He has considered all movements in the physical space with the assumption more or less implicit that a change of domicile was involved. Furthermore, the directions of migration are illustrated by more or less continuous movements from the rural areas to the urban, from areas of stable population to the centres of industrial or commercial opportunities. For example, movement from one market to another by many hawkers, in the study.

Studies by Zachariah (1969), Das Gupta and Lashley (1975) have considered that individuals migrate because of the pull factors of the hostland like better employment opportunities, better recreational and housing facilities. The push factors at home are usually poverty, indebtedness, social ostracism and unemployment. Social scientists have argued that this phenomenon has become very significant in the recent times because of globalisation and the Information Technology Revolution during the 1990s. Contemporary views on migration depart from the earlier premises of push-pull theory of migration. Globalisation and communication technology has affected extensively the original impetus of individuals to migrate. In this connection, Karen Leonard (2007) has pointed out that the push factors gave way to pull factors. Most of the migration studies (Sinha and Ataullah 1987) have emphasized the role of economic factors in

migration. It can be said that the push away from the insolvent villages and the pull of the city life made migration possible. It has been seen that these individuals have strong ties with their hometown. But they come to the city with the hope of upward mobility. Ernest Ravenstein is one of the earliest migration theorists who wrote 'Laws of Migration (1889)' where he concluded that migration is governed by push-pull process i.e. unfavourable condition in one place which push people out and favourable condition in an external location which pulls them out. Migration is the key driver for the emergence of local spaces for various types negotiations. Migrants, no matter whether they are rural-urban, urban-urban, or international migrants, not only move through different physical spaces and across administrative boundaries but also traverse and expand different social fields which are hierarchically structured spaces of positions (Bourdieu 1985: 724). They rather remain situated in one local social field that includes quite different social settings and stretches over multiple places between which resources, ideas, or information are exchanged. Migrants' everyday life is then not placeless but rather characterised through their experience of, their simultaneous embeddedness in, and their social networks across, specific local places (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004; Thieme 2007; Pries 2008; Brickel & Datta 2011; Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013). The places, where flows of people, goods, money, and information intersect and where they are exchanged, re-arranged and re-loaded with meaning are often located in cities (cf. Smith 2001; Glick Schiller & Çağlar 2011).

Urbanization is the most significant all India phenomena of our times. The city has today become an engine of growth, the main job provider. However, our cities remain ill-prepared to address the problems of poverty. Planning and governance continues to be the preserve of the politician-mafia-bureaucrat nexus. Whatever policy that does exist is poorly implemented. There is unabated official and social hostility towards the migrants in the city. They constitute mostly as a

part of an informal economy. As the cost of creating jobs in the informal sector is very low, it needs to be integrated into the context of the overall macro-economy. Recent studies on urban informal sector in developing countries are replete with examples of forced eviction of the squatters to fulfill the global city dreams of local elites and aspirational new middleclass (Chatterji and Roy 2016).

In the last two decades cities have caught up in the process of restructuring. This is more visible in the large cities of a developing nation. Any visitor to a metropolitan city in India after a gap of a decade will find the city different in various ways. These changes are not only in terms of the physical look of the city but also in its social economic and base. Traditional notions of cities have been given new terms in the urban studies such as post-Fordist, post-modern, post-urban, and post-industrial and so on. The management of the cities is becoming complex and the urbanized masses are much more demanding. The growth of the fastest growing cities such as Delhi, Bangalore, Bhubaneswar, Bhopal, Durgapur and Bhilai, Faridabad, Bhiwandi (near Mumbai), New Town (near Kolkata) and Surat are due to fast industrial growth or special infrastructure investment which are related to the capital cities. This can be understood with the help of regional context. Various studies have shown that the difference in the state's income is widened in the eighties and the Indian states are diverging rather than converging in terms of growth. Much of this is due to private sector investment in small pockets which is complemented by the location of prime public sector infrastructure in these same areas. At this time, the focus is given on the large cities and their economic growth. There has been a shift in the urban policy in the eighties and nineties in favour of large cities (Rondenelli 1990). This is also changing the

social and everyday lives of the residents and migrants in the city who are continuously adapting to the changes in the social and environment of the cities.

Cities are socially constructed. They are places of interaction, exchange, and communication that are permanently in a process of transition. They are reproduced by people's everyday practices and imaginations. Different actors occupy different positions of power in the social space of a city and thus have different interests, needs, and desires with regard to the design, functions, and qualities of urban space (Smith 2001). The state and resourceful actors have the power and capacities to structure the urban space through planning, to govern it through legislation, and to assign specific meanings to a city and its places through symbolic campaigns. In comparison, the poor have fewer options to shape the urban space– they are navigating through the existing urban fabric. Nonetheless, they carve out spatial niches and resist the hegemonic appropriations of the urban space by the powerful as Bayat (1997, 2004) demonstrated in a study of squatters and street vendors in Teheran.

Henri Lefebvre's work on everyday life in the modern world shows the emerging society of bureaucratically controlled consumerism and the necessity for an urban revolution had re-focused the attention of Marxists to the urban question and the contentious social production of urban space. Streets are constructed as a space with its new infrastructure such as widening of old streets, constructing flyovers, construction of condominiums and most importantly migrants are drawn to cities for upward economic mobility and aspirations, the possibility of accessing improved education and health facilities, and to create or re-create identity. In this context, it is an important phenomenon of how old and new migrant hawkers are negotiating at different levels to practice various types of livelihood. Neo-liberal city building agenda to make urban

space attractive for new investors also includes cleansing of the homeless and the jobless and not homelessness and joblessness from the centre of the cities to the peripheries further deepening socio-economic polarization.

With the economic liberalisation, there has been rapid growth of industries in the recent past. There has been massive inflow of capital and labour from various parts of the country which has converted the rural and backward areas into new township. Moreover, there has been change in the pattern in migration from rural to urban to rural to new urban townships which added a new dimension to the patterns of urbanization. With ongoing migration the population has also increased over the time. These new townships with large populations have developed into economic zones of industrial and commercial activities. For example, a large number of hawkers in Rajarhaat are originally are migrants who came to work as construction labourers in the sites.

Post- independence development in India has not only led to proliferation of large cities but together with the global economic shift, it has also affected the economic structure of the large cities. Saskia Sassen (2007) analyses that the large cities around the world are the terrain where multiplicity of globalisation processes assume concrete and localized forms. Cities in modern times are becoming the concentration of large disadvantaged population where conflict became an obvious feature. Cities have become places for global capital and also the marginalized people have found their voice and are making their own claims. The space created by the world wide grid of global cities have become spaces for the formation of new type of politics, identities and communities including transnational ones. In this place not only migration of capital takes place but also people both rich (professional workforce) and poor (migrant workers) occurred. This

suggests that this is a space of new dynamics of economy shaping politics and one should go beyond the culture and identity of people.

Several processes like economic restructuring and shift from stress on manufacturing to services, change in land use pattern, rural-urban migration has led to an expansion of the informal sector in these cities. Informal sector who are mainly from marginalized socio-economic background are also known as subalterns which also cuts across caste, class, religion, region and gender. The informal sector occupations/livelihoods includes diverse occupations such as car driver, bus driver, fish seller, store keeper, air condition repair mechanic, domestic help, beedi making workers, security guards and hawkers/street vendors. The categories of hawkers among others use physical space of the street for their livelihood. However, the right to use of physical space is a challenge for this sector especially on the streets. They mobilize themselves through networks with the lower bureaucracy and political parties to their claims to urban space for their livelihood as well as residence. However, it is not always negotiated by the state rather a middle category of individuals or groups known as intermediaries which comprises hawkers unions and individual men acting as a medium between the state and hawkers. Intermediaries play an important role in negotiating with the informal sector for the use of space. Many a times, older hawkers are the intermediaries for negotiations. For example, Naveed, a young hawker from Esplanade has mentioned that it is easy to acquire a shop with the help of an older and powerful hawker in the area.

In most Indian cities the urban poor survive by working in the informal sector who are most of the times migrants from other parts of the region. Poverty and lack of gainful employment in the rural areas and in the smaller towns drive large numbers of people to the cities for work and

livelihood. These people generally possess low skills and lack the level of education required for the better paid jobs in the formal sector. For example, Pankaj from Gariahat has mentioned that his parents migrated from Bangladesh in search of employment post partition. Similarly, another hawker said that he had no options in his village hence migrated to the city for better opportunities.

A large section of hawkers in urban areas are those with low skills and who have migrated to the larger cities from rural areas or small towns in search of employment. They are most of the times excluded from the city spaces. These people take to hawking when they do not find other means of livelihood. Though the income in this profession is low, the investment too is low and the people do not require special skills or training. Hence for these people, both men and women, hawking is the easiest form for earning their livelihood. There is also another section of the urban population that has taken to hawking those who were once engaged in the formal sector. Earlier, these people were engaged in better paid jobs in the textile mills in Mumbai and Ahmedabad and engineering firms in Kolkata. Formal sector workers in these three metropolises have had to face large scale unemployment due to the closure of these industries. Many of them, or their wives, have become hawkers in order to eke out a living. A study on hawkers conducted in these cities show that around 30% of the hawkers in Ahmedabad and Mumbai and 50% in Kolkata were once engaged in the formal sector (Bhowmik 2003). It was seen from the interviews that some of the old migrants (especially the ones who migrated before 1990s) migrated to the city primarily due to the push factors like closing down of factories, property disputes in the village, lack of proper harvest, dowry for daughter's marriage etc. For example, Gopal Saha from Hatibagan migrated to the city because the factory in which he worked shut down and he had no job. Similarly Bablu Sheikh, tea seller from Esplanade had to start



something on his own post migration from Bangladesh to take care of his huge family. Similarly, Soheb, a young hawker from Esplanade has mentioned that, *'My father had zero income in Bihar. He had business there but there was no such scope to work further. He came here with family but faced extreme trouble to settle down. But then grabbed this little space and started selling flowers. But it was not a success. After 2 years he started t-shirt, which he kept for 4 years and finally started body pray.'*

### **Kolkata Context**

In Kolkata, the issue of hawkers began in the 1950s when stables and wayside vacant public lands were converted into hawkers' corners. Eviction of the hawkers became a routine act for the corporation during the 1960s with the coming of fresh refugees from Bangladesh. In 1975, 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" (Bandyopadhyay 2007).

In 1997, the state legislature brought about an amendment to the Kolkata Municipal Act that declared any form of unauthorized occupation of streets and pavements by hawkers will be a non-bailable offence (The Calcutta Gazette, 19 November 1997). However, within a few months the hawkers began to reclaim their previous positions with the help of their unions, opposition party and even by the smaller constituents of the ruling party (Newsweek, 28 July 1997). It is then that the government had to think again of regulation of hawking as opposed to eviction and rehabilitation.

In the recent times, they are targeted by municipalities and police in the urban areas as illegal traders. For most hawkers, trading from the pavements is full of uncertainties. They are constantly harassed by the authorities. The local bodies conduct eviction drives to clear the pavements of these encroachers and in most cases confiscate their goods. A municipal raid is like

a cat and mouse game with municipal workers chasing them away while these people try to run away and hide from these raiders. Confiscation of their goods entails heavy fines for recovery. In most cases it means that the hawker has to take loans from private sources (at exorbitant interests) to either recover whatever remains of his confiscated goods or to restart his business. The level of unionization is low mainly because hawkers feel that they can survive through paying rents rather than forming unions that will fight for their rights. In order to overcome the difficulties hawkers organize themselves into unions that enable them to continue their activities. These organizations are mainly localized bodies representing hawkers in specific areas of the city and try to mobilize through different political parties. Some of these trade unions are independent organizations but most of them are affiliates of the larger trade union federations. Monosha from Gariahat mentioned that, *‘That was the end of 1970s, my husband started sitting near Ballygunge market. Then police used to ask him to leave so he used to shift from here to there. Sometimes we were running hawkers and otherwise sitting in one place for 1 month or 5-6 months. Then after 20 years, hawkers were not allowed here but then union was established to protect. Then finally from year 2000, no more issues of eviction’.*

### **Role of Middle Class and Hawking in Kolkata**

There has been centralization and decentralization in the large cities. These two terms have been used by Sassen (1994) where it is a process of change which people have been experiencing in the last two decades with a global shift from industrial to post- industrial service and information based activities as the dominant sector. While decentralization is a shift in population and jobs from the central areas of the city to the suburbs, centralization refers to the increased concentration of certain types of activities which is already present in the city in well-defined

locales. Post liberalisation has opened up trade and market for export and import activities. This has given rise to different classes in the society. However, Sassen (2007) observes that the class is declining in significance in the advanced industrial society. According to her, the global classes are not cosmopolitan. She further argued that these classes are embeddedness in the local environment of financials and business centres, national governments, and the localized micro-structures of daily life and struggles. Now, each of these is guided by the logic of profit more in the case of new elite in terms of food or art. The functioning of such globalisation involves large number of professional, managers, and executive and technical staff members. Finally it has been seen that the global class of low wage workers is more global and forward looking rather than of backward past than is usually assumed.

In the recent times, with the development of semi-skilled work and skilled professionals, a growing aspirational middle class is visible in cities. This category has a different approach towards the city. They prefer to live within the segregated areas, mostly, in condominiums with all kinds of facilities. Leela Fernandes has argued that India's move toward economic liberalization in the 1990s did not simply bring about changes in specific economic policies—it set into motion a broader shift in national political culture. This shift, compactly captured in the preceding quote from an editor of a fashion and lifestyle magazine, can be seen in an array of highly visible images of changing trends in consumption practices, lifestyles, and aspirations. These images have centered around the proliferation of commodities such as cell phones, washing machines, and color televisions (and the associated global brand names of these products). The rapid expansion of the service sector has received much public attention and has often been credited as being a central component in India's accelerated economic growth since the 1990s. High-tech workers have become a potent symbol of India's success in the global

economy. The identity of the new middle class has become a critical arena for the negotiation of uncertainties, anxieties, and resistances that arise from changes sparked by India's program of economic liberalization and the broader cultural and social dimensions of globalization that have been associated with this set of policies. The growth of civic organizations such as the Citizens Forum for Protection of Public Space represents an emerging trend in which the new middle class has begun to assert an autonomous form of agency as it has sought to defend its interests. The growing visibility and assertiveness of the new middle class in India's emerging political culture of liberalization has intensified public interest in the political behavior and leanings of the middle class. The urban middle class complains constantly on how these hawkers make urban life a living hell as they block pavements, create traffic problem and also engage in anti-social activities (though more often than not, the same representatives of middle class prefer to buy from hawkers as the goods they sell are cheaper though the quality is as good as those in the overpriced departmental stores and shopping malls).

On the other hand, the urban poor and the migrant communities tend to take a direct political route by approaching the local functionaries of the organized political parties to assert their claims to the city. However, as a part of securing their votes during municipal elections, the educated urban middleclass tend to stay away from the electoral politics and instead take the apolitical route to press their claims to the city (Chatterjee 2004, Benjamin 2008).

### **Networks, Negotiations and relationship within the City**

Another aspect of migrant hawker is that the occupational structure is seen to govern more by primeval ties of caste, religion, region, ethnic, language, village kinship and friendship. These network relations help to get a space to start his/her own business in the urban setting for a

migrant. In fact, resource network is also an important factor in motivating people to move out of their places of origin. This is evident in all the areas where hawkers help each other in setting up the business. For example, Bhowmik from Hatibagan has set up his stall with the help of his brother. He has no knowledge of the market initially.

Generally people move from village or small towns to the city with the help of their social networks which helps them to find jobs. At this time they have ethnic solidarity and strong neighbourhood ties. The same situation has been seen in this study among the first generations. It has been seen that social network plays an important role for an individual to migrate. In many interviews, one common idea came out that many hawkers have migrated with the help of social networks. When the first generation migrated they had no knowledge of the city and employment. It is their networks like brothers, distant cousins, maternal uncles and friends from the same village/district/town who have given them the idea of Kolkata. In many cases it has also been seen that when individuals migrated with their families they did not come directly to any of the selected markets in the study rather they stayed with their relatives and friends who are the social networks and then they entered the areas of study. For example, Sabbir from Esplanade migrated with his family who used to work in a shop as an assistant in Topsia. Soon he looked for an opportunity to start his business in Esplanade with the help of his friend and an old and powerful migrant hawker from Bihar, Sariful. Thus it is evident that social networks play an important role in migration. Similarly, Shanatan from Gariahat is handling his uncle's shop using similar kin networks.

Migrants use various types of networks to set up their business. Pankaj has stated that 'But in our side we do not allow an outsider to work. People try to recruit their own relatives or sons.'

Moreover, hawkers also deal with the survival challenges or different sides of negotiations. It is not linear rather multi layered. Negotiations are different for younger hawkers who came to the city for occupational reasons and for the older hawkers who have been a part of the city for a longer period of time. For example, acquiring a space to set up a stall, taking loans from local money lenders, enrollment with the union/s. Sabbir, a young hawker from Esplanade has said, *'Space for stall can be easily acquired with the help of personal networks with the older and powerful hawkers in the area.'*

Similarly, another hawker from Esplanade has mentioned that, for example, in some cases local bruisers, more often backed by political parties collect protection fees through threats. Their links with the local authorities ensure that those who pay will not be disturbed and those who do not pay will face eviction either by the bruisers or the authorities. Gariahat Police Officer in Charge has critically pointed out that hawkers bribe the local authorities to secure spaces for their stalls. It is not only hafta but also salami which is given to the local authorities by the permanent shops to secure a shop on the main road and not inside the lanes. Salami is given by older permanent shopkeeper to acquire space in a visible position in the market. The other form of negotiation could be based on sudden raids, hawkers normally have to regularly bribe the authorities in order to carry out their business on the streets. Narayan Saha from Hatibagan mentioned that, *'At first, my shop was located on the opposite of Uttara Market. The place beside the toilet. I had to shift because they evicted us during Operation Sunshine. The government gave us place to do business and then the government only evicted us.'*

Pankaj from Gariahat has mentioned that '*(smiling) re se toh sob jayagay ache. Amara taka kamabo, opor tolake ektu diye sontushto toh rakhte hoy. Setai di. Nahole oi 1996 er moto din theke berote partam na. '*

## **Conclusion**

This study has looked at changing spatial practices and different types of negotiations that occurs between migrant hawkers in Kolkata. They are always un-welcomed to the city which points to the question of their dealing with the new place with increased risks involved along with opening up of new opportunity. Moreover it gives some insight into the migration propensity of each group in different areas. Contrary to the expectation of migration concentration towards a specific region, there is migration spread across most regions of the country and to rural and urban destinations. In particular the results indicate a higher propensity for migration to the city based on their ethnic background. This outcome contradicts the patterns of mega-city and primate-city development that are often predicted for developing countries. It speaks contrary to population concentration towards one metropolitan city, leading to what is termed 'over urbanization' and unmanageable agglomerates. Perhaps such a trend may have been reversed as part of what Kuroda (1977) termed the migration transition. The rural-urban migration is prominent which shows that people are attracted by the bright lights of cities but may rather be looking for economic sustenance. This is an area of policy importance, as it is already known that policies to deter urban growth caused by migration are difficult to implement in the absence of coercion by governments (Brockerhoff 1998). This is critical for Kolkata as migrants are coming to the city to find livelihood, even today by negotiating at different levels.

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