

The politics of hawking: a reading of the Hawker Sangram Committee, Calcutta

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This paper proposes to address the theme of the workshop by presenting an ethnographic case study of what is arguably the most powerful hawker union in Calcutta, India, the Hawker Sangram Committee (HSC). It focuses on the politics of the HSC and tries to understand why it has seen the kind of success that it has in protecting the interests of its membership in contemporary Calcutta.

The HSC cannot be studied in isolation, and has to be understood in the broader context of the history of hawking and state response to it from the eighteenth century to contemporary India. There are three sections in this paper which deal with a) the evolution of the figure of the hawker, b) hawkers and unionisation and c) the Hawker Sangram Committee, Calcutta.

Section I: The evolution of the figure of the hawker

Chances are if you raise the topic of hawkers in India, nobody will stare blankly at you. Hawking is so ubiquitous and visible in the urban space that it would perhaps not be an exaggeration to say that the lives of urban-dwellers and urban-workers continuously intersect and interact with those of hawkers, whether in relationships as buyers and sellers or in more antagonistic ones bent on seeing hawking as a 'menace'. However, for a phenomenon that seems to have such a shared understanding about what it is (even if not about how it should be treated), it is curiously difficult to pinpoint its exact nature and definition. There is a fluidity to the occupation that resists such a project. Is a hawker a street vendor? A pheriwala? A trader? A salesman? A self-employed worker? An entrepreneur? A peddler? A small businessman? A wage-worker? Each of these terms has a particular charge, one of the most recognisable of which is that of class. But at the level of experience these terms often seem to dissolve into each other: an 'entrepreneur' is as likely to be evicted as a 'wage worker'. The most common of their shared experiences is perhaps that of being illegal; it is the functional illegality of hawking that is arguably the fulcrum that holds together the idea of this community today.

The definition of the Indian state of the hawker in two national policies and the legislative act on hawking treats the various local terms for the occupation on equal footing¹. The definition is too wide to be specific, and yet, it draws its specificity from the fact that the legislation is a response to the treating of hawking as illegal and the issues that result from it. Take away the charge of illegality, and one would probably see this ‘community’ splintering into several groups organised by different logic. Indeed even today when the charge of illegality is strong, there are differences in how hawkers perceive each other, even as hawker organisers come together in a united front to demand legal rights from the state. There are, at least in Calcutta, differences between stationary hawkers and flying (mobile) hawkers, hawkers with stalls and hawkers who operate from gunny sacks on the road. These are differences not just in terms of self-perceived identity but also because lived experiences of different types of hawkers vary. Hawkers with temporary structures, for instance, are more likely to face eviction and confiscation of goods as opposed to mobile hawkers.

The tendency of hawking to escape relatively neat definitions can be frustrating. In the course of fieldwork and literature review off-hand references were often made to the ‘age old figure’ of the hawker, which always seemed to lie just out of reach. Histories of Calcutta, for instance, refer to flourishing trade, incoming migrants, periods of acute poverty, but make little or no mention of hawkers, who must have existed in these conditions. Or there are references to book hawkers, but only in passing (Gupta and Chaliha 1990) (K. Sinha 2008).

Although a more rigorous search would doubtless bear more fruit, it is perhaps not surprising that historical accounts of the much referred to figure of the hawker are hard to find. Neeladri Bhattacharya notes that the gaze of the historian was fixed for long on ‘international trade, trading companies and agency houses’ and that even after the relatively recent shift in scholarship² to the level of the bazaar, the hawker, especially the smaller, mobile trader, got left out (Bhattacharya 2003). With regard to Calcutta, Pradip Sinha notes that despite a ‘torrent’ of migration of porters, carters and a ‘motley crowd’ of labourers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a systematic study of ‘this vast unorganised sector’ had not been made (P. Sinha 1990). Brief attempts at recovering the figure of the hawker

¹ National Policy on Urban Street Vendors, 2004 and National Policy on Urban Street Vendors, 2009 (along with a 2006 version by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector); The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014

² Bhattacharya cites publications from 1983, 1988 and 1998

from history must therefore, in this paper, be limited to essays by Bhattacharya and K.N. Chaudhuri on the figure of the hawker (Chaudhuri 1979).

The historical figure of the hawker

From the picture Bhattacharya draws of the hawker and the hawker's interactions with state and society, it becomes evident that if the figure of the hawker is 'age-old' so are the challenges of agreeing upon what exactly a hawker is. Characterised chiefly by mobility in colonial India, hawkers operated in self-organised networks paying no heed to administrative boundaries. A sense of self marked by contrary pulls of *izzat* (pride) and shame at their rootlessness, they were watched and feared by the colonial state and local populations. The state in turn was pulled by contrary forces: on the one hand it was suspicious of the hawker, especially the long-distance hawker, but on the other hand, because of their economic role in society, the state was content to impede their functioning as opposed to outright stopping them (it is a different matter that 'stopping hawkers' is an entirely fictional concept, as local administrations across India will vouch!).

It is relevant to highlight certain points that emerge from his essay, in view of the upcoming discussion.

1. The idea of the hawker

One of the interesting things Bhattacharya points out to begin with is that in the Punjab countryside³, anyone having the use of a donkey, a bullock or a cart could become a small time hawker⁴. The idea that anybody can become a hawker seems to have travelled across the years and is offered by activists and hawker movements themselves when speaking of the importance of hawking as a livelihood option today. This is slightly misleading, for hawking has its own ways of consciously and unconsciously keeping aspirants out. He also points out that often, hawking was combined with other occupations.

Circulation was key to the idea of the hawker. The hawker circulated herself⁵, and also enabled the circulation of goods and services (including entertainment) between villages

³ For this work, he draws evidence from colonial Punjab, Himachal and the North West Frontier Provinces.

⁴ 'Peddler' is Bhattacharya's preferred term in the essay. However since there is no discussion on terms in general, or explanation for why he prefers peddler, I use the word 'hawker' for the sake of uniformity.

⁵ It is unlikely that mobile hawkers had single women in their ranks, although many mobile hawkers moved as a family unit, making women hawkers as well. Indeed, Bhattacharya gives the example of a mobile Lohar, Mangala (Pg.170), who produced tools and utensils while his wife went around selling them. The 'herself' is

and towns. They were a very important part of village life not only because of the material goods they offered but also by way of social and cultural life. Bhattacharya notes that moving entertainers were agents of connection forging a popular culture that bonded rural communities across regions.

It seems that when hawkers were key players of trade, what constituted the market was less rigidly defined in terms of space and place. Often, the arrival of a hawker meant the arrival of the market. The hawker, being willing to sell on long-term credit, allowed even the poor to buy from them.

2. Distinguishing the hawker from the merchant

One of the first difficulties of recovering the figure of the hawker is the question of what exactly distinguishes a hawker from a merchant. How does one visually and conceptually distinguish one from the other, particularly in the case of stationary hawkers? A casual walk through Calcutta today presents many faces of trade and often it is hard to understand just what it is that separates a very small trader from a hawker who operates out of a temporary enclosure, except from the point of view of the law (in terms of trade licenses etc).

Bhattacharya focuses on overland caravan trading, but we know he acknowledges, even if he does not mention how to distinguish between, the other kind of native trader/merchant because he draws from Chaudhuri's work that argues against the reduction of pre-modern Indian trading to 'primitive, small, and decentralised markets' by Western⁶ historians and against the tendency to see the institutional character of Asian markets and merchants as a sum of peddling activities. Chaudhuri seems to have a more clear-cut distinction in mind, refusing to see those involved in overland caravan trading which made use of 'fairly sophisticated commercial methods' as a 'true peddler'. The latter was, for Chaudhuri, mostly engaged in local trade, going from village to village with bullock carts 'buying pieces of cloth from individual weavers and retailing their ware in the same fashion.'

It seems as if a tentative distinction can be made between the hawker and the merchant at the level of scale, of volumes of trade represented by procurement and sales. Chaudhuri also holds skill difference as a distinction between the two categories. He does not

used here less to denote the gender of the hawker and more as a political alternative to the generic, universal 'he/himself'.

⁶ He refers to the work of J.C. van Leur and Niels Steensgaard here.

consider the Armenian traders in India as hawkers despite the fact that they were mobile, because they were highly skilled, for instance, in terms of the trade networks they had established across the world. Less tenable but also worth mentioning is the unit of reference and representation, i.e. the individual in the case of merchants versus the group in the case of hawkers. Whether in terms of wealth, or economic power, or the level at which political power is held, Chaudhuri particularly seems to associate merchants with the individual and hawkers with the group or community.

3. Self-organization

Hawkers organised their trade circuits around fluctuations in weather, populations and changes in their distribution and organised themselves internally as well. Bhattacharya notes that hawker communities moved in groups and divided the rural market among themselves, thereby eliminating competition. Moving in the same circuits also allowed villagers to become used to them. This internal division of territory however paid little heed to was administrative boundaries.

Self organization also became a sort of collective guarantee for society, and the basis of their liquidity. Collective movement, points of Bhattacharya, was for security from enemy attacks as well as to create a 'grand spectacle of power' to 'overawe' the enemy. So powerful were hawker lobbies that Bhattacharya points to the Joint Commissioner of Ladakh complaining of their monopoly power and coercive tactics.

4. The hawker and the state

Bhattacharya speaks about the colonial paranoia around the long distance hawker and how this paranoia was also shared by local populations sometimes. This was especially true of large groups of long-distance hawkers such as the 'hefty' Pathans. They became a fearful other for the British, always suspected of being up to no good, with hawking presumed to be just a cover. Bhattacharya states that to most officials the line of difference between hawkers and criminals was thin, as was that between hawking and beggary. The hawker's mobility, transgressing the 'natural' order of rootedness, made her always already guilty, leading to widespread distrust and surveillance. This distrust is poignantly captured by Tagore in his short story *Kabuliwala* (Tagore n.d.).

Bhattacharya points out the contrary impulses driving official action: there was a desire to promote trade as well as a desire to control crime. This often led to a wonderfully

bizarre situation where *rahdari parwanahs* issued to hawkers certifying them as honest was met with outrage in another jurisdictional area because it effectively legitimised them⁷. He points out in his essay that these *parwanahs* could be produced by hawkers when questioned or harassed as proof that one of their own had certified them. This created turmoil within the colonial administrative mechanism which had its autonomy to challenge the honesty of a hawker taken away, legally, by the issuer of a *parawanah* in another location.

Hawkers resisted surveillance by their constant motion and elusiveness; they constantly crossed administrative boundaries creating bureaucratic pressure in the form of bickering over jurisdiction, in the question of who was to bear the cost of policing them and deporting them⁸. Also striking is Bhattacharya's note that deporting hawkers only renewed the cycle of their movement, much like how eviction drives today lead to more hawkers eventually operating out of the same space ('Kolkata sold off piece by piece', Times of India, 20 April 2010⁹).

Hawkers have thus historically negotiated rules and regulations, harassment and deportations in order to ply their trade. Hawking did not die, simply because hawkers met a demand. As Bhattacharya notes, fixed markets and bazaars catered to a limited population only. He says 'different forms of market transactions were, in fact, interlinked, each sustaining and serviced by the other'. There were links between hawkers and local fairs, links between different hawker circuits and links between big merchants, wholesalers and established urban firms with hawkers by way of credit, cash and commodity flows.

The contemporary hawker

In contrasting this with notions of the hawker today, one aspect that becomes evident is that there has been a movement towards being stationary for the contemporary hawker. It is

⁷ This interesting situation also played out in Bombay, where informal 'pautis' issued by the Bombay Municipal Corporation to 'illegal' hawkers started being used as a legal document by hawkers, leading the High Court, on the complaint of some NGOs, to order the BMC to cease the practice at once (Anjaria, Street Hawkers and Public Space in Mumbai 2006).

⁸ This creation of bureaucratic pressure, perhaps unintentionally, is played out in a fascinating form of strategy by the Hawker Sangram Committee in Calcutta. During the agitations in March-April 2012 against the evictions along the EM Bypass, they organized twice daily protest marches at all the evicted spots. Shaktiman Ghosh, Gen. Sec. of HSC, mentioned how these, in addition to other things, created pressure on the local Police Station who have to write and submit reports with every corresponding agitation, which is an annoying and irritating task.

⁹ Accessible at http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2010-04-20/kolkata/28135085_1_hawker-sangram-committee-new-hawkers-shaktiman-ghosh

not mobility as much as being stationary that defines today's urban hawker and drives the urban anxiety about hawkers. Mobile hawkers are welcome; it is the stationary ones that threaten the politics of space. This can be seen in how eviction has come to be one of the most politically charged issues around the hawker question, and eviction drives generally target hawkers with temporary stalls. Civic associations that organise around issues of governance, 'development' and 'beautification' take offence with the hawker who refuses to go away. Such organizations have been much written about in the case of Bombay, and from one such account, an active anti-hawker civic activist is quoted-

““When I was growing up, there used to be a coconut man,” fondly recalled Maya, a civic activist in Mumbai. “He carried a basket of coconuts on his head and walked around. If you wanted one, he would stop and cut it open for you.” Telling me this, Maya smiles and laughs, warmed by the nostalgia for an earlier era of the city. However, “In the 1980s [things changed],” Maya continued, “migrants started coming specifically to hawk on the footpaths. They are not the traditional hawkers. They have come to set up a business; to occupy a place on the footpath and call it their own.””

- **Jonathan Anjaria** (Anjaria, *Guardians of the Bourgeois City: Citizenship, Public Space, and Middle-Class Activism in Mumbai* 2009)

Who are these dangerous 'new' hawkers and how does society understand them?

As mentioned earlier, there seems to be a shared understanding of the term 'hawker', used interchangeably with 'street vendor', 'vendor', 'peddler' etc. The reason they can operate like synonyms is not because all hawkers are identical but because they are all functionally illegal. Since the functional illegality is most talked about in the case of the stationary hawker, a certain homogenisation of the figure of the hawker occurs, obscuring the different challenges and concerns of different types of hawkers. The following discussion explores this homogenisation and finds that there are tensions even in this project (of homogenisation).

1. The Media

There is little scope to understand the different types of hawkers and the related differences of dynamics with the state and society from media engagement with the 'hawker problem'. However, this production of the figure of the 'illegal' hawker reflects a complex

interweaving of forces in society, of which the middle classes and the English language are a key part.

In the editorial stance and language of reporting, there is a sense of righteousness associated with eviction of ‘illegal’ hawkers who are viewed as encroachers and thieves of public space. Hawkers are perceived as congesting roads, impeding the movement of traffic, obstructing the flow of pedestrians on pavements and making cities look ugly, unruly.

Sharit Bhowmik notes in an essay-

“Hawkers/street vendors have existed since time immemorial. In recent times however they have come to be regarded as public nuisance by certain sections of the urban population. NGOs representing the elite sections, especially the residents’ associations, are most vocal in restoration of pavements as public space only when street vendors ‘encroach’ on them. The constant tirade by this elite that street vendors deprive pedestrians of their space, cause traffic jams and encourage anti-social activities finds favour with the media which high-lights these issues. ”

- **Sharit Bhowmik** (S. K. Bhowmik 2003)

Anjaria complicates this picture by pointing out that the reality is not so simple. Although news reports on hawkers in Mumbai often quote representatives of neighbourhood associations and Residents Welfare Associations expressing a desire to be hawker-free (‘Police hesitate to take on hawkers’ 17 August 2012, Times of India¹⁰; ‘Hill Road hawkers vanish yet again’, 26 March 2013, Times of India¹¹) Anjaria points out that often such voices are not really representative of the residents they claim to speak on behalf of (Anjaria, *Guardians of the Bourgeois City: Citizenship, Public Space, and Middle-Class Activism in Mumbai* 2009). Through ethnography of such organizations, Anjaria shows that some residents actually want food and vegetables hawkers in their neighbourhoods and RWA activists are not popular with these sections.

On a closer look, the fractured middle-class voice on hawkers becomes noticeable in the media. If Bhowmik and Anjaria (Anjaria, *Ordinary States: Everyday Corruption and the Politics of Space in Mumbai* 2011) point to an English language media that frequently

¹⁰ Accessible at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/Police-hesitate-to-take-on-hawkers/articleshow/15524934.cms>

¹¹ Accessible at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/Hill-Road-hawkers-vanish-yet-again/articleshow/19206680.cms>

promote the image of the hawker as an ‘interloper’ on the urban landscape, one also increasingly comes across reports that betray the fact that these voices face resistance of many kinds. For example, this can be seen in terms of opinion pieces authored by pro-hawker voices from society (‘Hawk Land’, 15 March 2013, Time Out Mumbai¹²) and news stories that seek to show how anti-hawker drives are resisted and fail (‘Actress-turned-politician wakes up to hawker menace, party snubs her’, 8 November 2011, DNA¹³).

2. The State

It is well known that the state acknowledges the hawker in its everyday relationships with it through evictions, bribes, informal licence systems, negotiations etc. But what is interesting is that there is a history of the state simultaneously formalising this engagement through various legal means: from judicial judgements 1966 onwards, to the two national policies in 2004 and 2009 on hawking to finally an Act in 2014 that conditionally legalises hawking. It is worth asking how the state defines the hawker and also when and *why* it begins to do so.

In Maya’s imagination a movement had occurred from mobility to the ‘business-oriented’ migrant stationary hawker. However the roving coconut hawker that she so fondly reminisces about is not really the ‘original’/‘authentic’ hawker. A Punjab High Court case reveals that stationary hawkers were getting in trouble even in 1966¹⁴. However, she is also not entirely wrong; while stationary hawkers would most definitely have co-existed with her coconut man, the stationary hawker has in the last few decades, as already mentioned, become the focus of urban attention because of the politics of space. It is the stationary hawker who is made functionally illegal by provisions in municipal and police acts which relate to, for instance, obstruction of streets and pavements, and it was evicted hawkers who had put up a slew of Public Interest Litigations (PILs) at the Supreme Court in the 1980s. Judgements were passed in their favour (in the 1980s), advocating rights with regulation, because in this period the poor were seen to have a legitimate moral claim on state welfare. The state recognised that it had a duty to follow up evictions with rehabilitation.

¹² Accessible at <http://www.timeoutmumbai.net/mumbai-local/features/hawk-land>

¹³ Accessible at <http://www.dnaindia.com/mumbai/1609141/report-actress-turned-politician-wakes-up-to-hawker-menace-party-snubs-her>

¹⁴ This case is referred to in the 2010 judgement of *Gainda Ram and Others vs MCD and Others* in a compilation of Supreme Court Judgements relevant to hawkers published by the National Hawker Federation

A transformation occurs in the urban towards the end of the century: the new, globalised post-industrial metropolis is structured and organised on a different logic. The state's relationship with the poor changes: it no longer recognises their moral claim to welfare like before. However this is also the period when the state forms the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector and drafts the national policies. The question is, if it is not the logic of the moral claim of the poor that is functioning, what is?

According to Ananya Roy, it is the urge to plan this new metropolis that forms the logic (Roy, *Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning* 2005). The renewed interest in informality in policy circles in the past decade has produced planning as a new mechanism of power. Planning allows the state to construct and reconstruct legitimacy and through it construct and reconstruct its own legitimacy. Thus the state's understanding of informality, its desire to plan urban spaces and the anxiety about the stationary hawker all came together to result in a Bill on hawking which became an Act in February 2014. This Act has been welcomed as a step in the desired direction by organised hawkers movements across the country like the National Hawker Federation, Self Employed Women's Association, National Association of Street Vendors of India who have been demanding legalisation because, as Anjaria points out-

1. *"The experiences of hawkers in Mumbai, as elsewhere in India, have taught them not to fear a regulatory state, but a predatory one...against which a licence provides security"*
2. *"The local state's power does not come from acts of legalising hawking, but from keeping their legal status in constant flux. Thus the subversive act of the street hawker is, ironically, not to circumvent the law or the surveilling eye of the state, but to find a place within it."*

- **Jonathan Anjaria** (Anjaria, *Street Hawkers and Public Space in Mumbai* 2006)

The Act ends up highlighting the role to be played by organised hawkers' bodies in protecting and regulating the presence of hawkers in urban spaces in the future. To break it down to its basics: the Act concentrates a lot of power in the local Town Vending Committee (TVC), which is required to have forty percent representation of hawkers, of which one third are to be women. The TVC is responsible for registration of hawkers, approving hawking certificates, five year planning (determining hawking zones etc), framing of schemes,

redressal of grievances and making available credit, insurance and schemes for social security. It also has the power to evict and displace if deemed necessary, and to determine the manner in which such displacement is to be mitigated.

It is important to note that sixty percent non-hawker representation means that, technically, the hawker vote in above matters can be overruled every time. This would be more so if the voice of the forty percent is weak or divided. Very interestingly, while the 2004 and 2009 policies explicitly advocate the promotion of organizations of hawkers as the basis of credit, social security insurance programmes and for the creation of a united front for negotiation and protection of hawker rights, the 2014 Act shrinks the role of such organizations into one tiny insignificant clause. It rather seems to be saying, we're fine without organised hawkers, thanks.

Ironically, by doing so it actually ends up emphasising the role to be played by hawkers associations in the future, as mentioned above. This is because, as Anjaria points out, there is no direct relationship between the letter of the law and how the law works in practice, even if we assume for a moment that it is a flawless piece of legislation (which it is not) (Anjaria, Street Hawkers and Public Space in Mumbai 2006). It is a question of not just the implementation of the law, but perhaps what is equally, if not more important, the question of interpretation of the law. The HSC acknowledges this when it says that while the law would be a big victory for them, it would not be a 'final' solution. "The law can go against us if our collective politics isn't strong. We have to follow it up with our struggle," says Shaktiman Ghosh, General Secretary of the HSC. "We have to empower our TVC members and we have to be vigilant about the declaration of non-hawking zones. The TVC takes only forty percent of us; this is a danger area for us."

This has a two-fold implication: 1) it would seem that for hawkers to make good usage of the upcoming law, they would have to build strong organizations amongst themselves, and 2) now, more than ever, we need to understand the unionisation process to get a picture of which hawkers choose not to or are unable to come within the folds of hawker unions.

Section II: Hawkers and Unionisation

Hawkers skilfully manage complex terrains of political economy in order to function. However, they do not tend to favour unionism very much. Sharit Bhowmik's research reveals

that very few hawkers tend to be unionised (S. K. Bhowmik 2005). Jonathan Anjaria's extensive research on Mumbai hawkers highlights informal self-organization and self-regulation but is almost silent on the presence of unions. When they feature in his work at all, they do so in dubious contexts, such as the union leader who goes around with a shopping list for vegetables given by the local police station (Anjaria, *Ordinary States: Everyday Corruption and the Politics of Space in Mumbai* 2011)! Another union is shown being referred to dismissively by hawkers who thought their suggestion of stopping the *hafta* (rent collection) practice was out of touch with the reality of hawking (Anjaria, *Ordinary States: Everyday Corruption and the Politics of Space in Mumbai* 2011). Recently while doing fieldwork with the National Hawker Federation in New Delhi, I was told that Delhi hawkers say, "*Sangathan ko paise kyon de? Police roti deti hai*" (Why should we pay membership fees to unions? It's the Police that makes our livelihoods possible.) No matter how economically coercive, and irrespective of the fact that studies have shown they would rather transition to a legal licence system and pay taxes as opposed to bribes, by and large it seems as if hawkers are content with the status quo-till they are evicted. And even then, it is only when post-eviction bribes are not effective in restoring a hawker to her original hawking spot, do they explore other options. So even though Mumbai has by some estimates about thirty five unions, and Delhi has around a hundred unions¹⁵, neither of these cities has much of a reputation for powerful union action.

This is not so in Calcutta. Calcutta hawkers have always had a relatively high rate of unionisation (S. K. Bhowmik 2005) and since 1996 the Hawker Sangram Committee, an umbrella organisation of hawkers unions has come to represent the most powerful hawkers union not just in Calcutta, but perhaps all over India. I explore the genesis and continuing relevance of the HSC in this section.

Section III: The Hawker Sangram Committee, Calcutta

Operation Sunshine

Eighteen years ago, on 3 September 1996, over 30 hawker unions in Calcutta and seven central trade unions came together to form the HSC. Just two years earlier, in 1994, the West Bengal state government had launched its New Economic Policy. It was now giving

¹⁵ These figures are based on responses received during fieldwork in Mumbai and Delhi, May 2014

indications that its tolerance of hawkers¹⁶ would rapidly wane in favour of re-fashioning the city to attract foreign capital in a bid to improve the regions poor economic performance. In the near future lay a prospective visit by Prime Minister John Major and the promise of British funding. From an article in Seminar magazine (Ghosh 2000) by the general secretary of the HSC, Shaktiman Ghosh, it appears that various hawker unions in the city had started to sense the impending evictions named Operation Sunshine three months before it actually happened and went into a flurry of activity. This culminated in the decision to form an independent federation of hawker unions, which moved the High Court and took out rallies, launched public campaigns highlighting the service that hawkers provide to all sections of a city's population, forwarded proposals about rehabilitation for hawkers and started to proactively guard their stalls. They even met with state government representatives including Subhas Chakrabarti, the Transport Minister, who was one of the chief architects of Operation Sunshine.

Despite all this, 1,640 stalls were razed and 102 hawkers were arrested (Ghosh 2000) in the first action. What followed in the immediate aftermath can be pieced together from newspaper reports, accounts by academic researchers and Ghosh.

Newspaper reports indicate that Operation Sunshine ended up being an eleven month operation which carried on till at least 9 August 1997 ('Calcutta Hawkers Back in Business' The Indian Express, 27 July, 1997¹⁷). They mention that the target had been to clear twenty one thoroughfares starting with areas in Gariahaat, Hatibagaan and Shyambazaar, but that despite the razed stalls and massive deployment of police force and municipal workers, hawkers backed by the HSC¹⁸ were back on all the cleared roads by July 1997. Reports indicate that HSC members 'fought pitched battles with the police during the eviction raids' ('Kolkata sold-off piece by piece', Times of India, 20 April 2010¹⁹), torched a tram car in Gariahaat ('Debut, a streetcar named Discovery', The Telegraph²⁰), and that there were

¹⁶ Although all types of hawking are illegal under the Kolkata Municipal Corporation Act, 1980, this legislation was not really enforced prior to 1996.

¹⁷ Accessible at <http://expressindia.indianexpress.com/ie/daily/19970728/20950583.html>

¹⁸ The report states that hawkers backed by the AITUC, AICCTU and 'several other unions affiliated with the left parties other than CPM' had reoccupied the spots they had been evicted from. The description of the unions is that of the HSC.

¹⁹ Accessible at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Kolkata-sold-off-piece-by-piece/articleshow/5834130.cms>

²⁰ Article recovered from the website of The Telegraph on 29 May 2013; http://www.telegraphindia.com/1020304/the_east.htm

‘routine police-hawker skirmishes in areas like Gariahaat and elsewhere’ (‘Calcutta Hawkers Back in Business’ Financial Express, 27 July, 1997²¹).

Partha Chatterjee, in a 2001 essay (Chatterjee 2004) states that over a period of two weeks, in a ‘well-planned coordinated action code-named Operation Sunshine’, municipal authorities and police demolished ‘all street-side stalls in Calcutta, cleared the side-walks, expanded the roadways and planted trees’²². He notes that although vendors were still organised in their pre-Operation Sunshine forms, they turned to the opposition party and ‘did not resist physically; there were no violent confrontations’. He states further that ‘the political balance having turned against them, they had to yield their place on the streets and wait until the promises of rehabilitation materialised’.

Ananya Roy in a 2004 essay (Roy, The Gentleman's City: Urban Informality in the Calcutta of New Communism 2004) notes that Calcutta Municipal Corporation officials, cadres of CPI(M) and police battalions demolished the ‘sidewalk stalls of thousands of petty traders’. She states that evictions continued through 1997 and that as they progressed ‘hawkers staged daily protests, stopping traffic at key intersections.’ She adds: ‘mobilised by opposition leaders like the fiery Mamata Banerjee, they also tried to return to the sidewalks with baskets of goods’. She mentions that Kanti Ganguly of the CPM, another key architect of Operation Sunshine, apparently rehabilitated small groups of hawkers in his ‘zone of control’²³. She notes that *Newsweek* magazine hailed Operation Sunshine as a resounding success.

Shaktiman Ghosh’s account in *Seminar Magazine* (Ghosh 2000) states that Operation Sunshine was carried out at night on 24 November, 1996 and that hundreds of Left Front leaders, police and CPM cadres wearing badges of Calcutta Municipal Corporation resorted to ransacking, loot, arson and indiscriminate assault on hawkers. In addition to the stalls burnt and hawkers arrested, Ghosh also reports hawker suicides in the aftermath. The vigilance that hawkers had been reportedly maintaining had been abandoned because apparently Subhas Chakrabarti had promised an HSC delegation that peaceful and amicable rehabilitation would follow. Ghosh states that following this, road blockades and processions were organised at

²¹ Accessible at <http://expressindia.indianexpress.com/ie/daily/19970728/20950583.html>

²² It must be noted that all street side stalls were not cleared. Only those on 21 streets.

²³ This ‘zone of control’ being near the Sukanta Bridge at the Jadavpur railway station, and along the Bypass at Rashbehari Connector

different spots, a 12 hour bandh was called on 27 November, and a ‘civil disobedience struggle’ was launched which reportedly continued till 5 December 1998.

As can be seen, these accounts contradict each other. The ‘facts’ of Operation Sunshine and the following hawker resistance cannot be agreed upon in the conventional manner. There is agreement that Operation Sunshine happened, but how long it went on till, how many hawkers were targeted and whether it was successful in achieving its goal of sunshine filled hawker-less pavements depends on which combination of the above accounts one believes. As for resistance, Roy and Chatterjee are silent on the presence of the HSC.

The Nameless Operation

Fast-forward to March 2012 and another round of evictions in the city. This time no code-names are given and are carried out by the government of Mamata Banerjee: still fiery, but no longer in the opposition. Ghosh releases a press statement on behalf of the National Hawker Federation²⁴ stating that 4000 hawkers and 3000 slum-dwellers were evicted from the stretch between Science City and Dhalai Bridge on the E.M. Bypass. An article in The Sunday Indian (‘Slum Dwellers, hawkers face eviction in Kolkata’ 16 May 2012²⁵) notes that the Bypass hawkers were targeted to make way for an 8-lane road and for the proposed East-West Metro Corridor. The press statement also mentions that evictions had been carried out in the last few months from Harish Mukherjee Road, Sealdah, Howrah Manglahaat, Janapriya Bazaar, Jadavpur, Garia, Bagha Jatin, Salt Lake, Park Street, Lake Market, New Town Rajarhaat and that an eviction notice had been given to hawkers in front of the corporate owned Gateway Hotel at the Ruby crossing. Newspaper reports, although few and far between, seem to confirm the statement (‘Committee threatens stir against evictions’ Times of India, 5 January 2012²⁶, ‘Hawkers stage protest against eviction in Kolkata’ The Sunday Indian, 18 February, 2012²⁷).

²⁴ Received in my personal email account, sent by the New Trade Union Initiative (a national federation of independent trade unions). Accessible at <http://socialactivistjal.blogspot.in/2012/03/eviction-of-hawkers-and-slum-dwellers.html>

²⁵ Accessible at <http://www.thesundayindian.com/en/story/slum-dwellers-hawkers-face-eviction-in-kolkata/14/34954/>

²⁶ Accessible at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Committee-threatens-stir-against-eviction/articleshow/11370276.cms?referral=PM>

²⁷ Accessible at <http://www.thesundayindian.com/en/story/hawkers-stage-protest-against-eviction-in-kolkata/254/30236/>

My own observations revealed banners of the HSC inscribed with ‘*ei uchhed kar shaarthhe*’ (‘evictions in whose interest?’) tied at the eviction spots along the Bypass²⁸ and almost daily protest marches by the Patuli and Big Bazaar hawkers. These hawkers were continuing operations with reduced goods and a bare minimum of infrastructure and maintaining 24 hour vigils by their reoccupied spots to guard against re-eviction. Mass meetings at these two sites were frequently held to urgently discuss strategy and action. Women hawkers militantly declared that if the bulldozers came again, they would have to go over their bodies. There were also firm declarations that the sites must put up a united front: hawkers who did not join the resistance would not be allowed to enjoy the fruits of the resistance. Free riding would not be allowed.

At other evicted sites in the city, I attended various forms of protest. These included protest marches or *michhils*, human chains, candle light protests, gheraoing of police stations, amongst others. This was kept up from March till May 2012. On 10 May lorries loaded with hundreds of HSC hawkers arrived at the KMDA office at Salt Lake. Voices roaring slogans echoed under the flyover and I could see the Big Bazaar hawkers visibly feeding off the energy, big grins on their faces.

In contrast to this big show of power, the hawkers and the Police politely arranged themselves around each other on the street: the Police were not the target of protests this time. Hawkers stood in protest formation with banners, waving slogan-inscribed empty thermocol plates.

An HSC delegation met with KMDA officials and Firhad Hakim, Minister for Urban Development and Municipal Affairs, Government of West Bengal, and came out stating the outcome: no new evictions would be carried out and the hawkers would either be accommodated at the same spots or be given mutually decided upon alternatives. The massive *jail bhara aandolan* planned for 26 May, International Hawkers Day, was dropped in the face of further assurances by Hakim. By this time, all the hawkers except the hawkers at Sealdah, Manglahaat and Harish Mukherjee Road were back in operation, without the harassment of authorities. In the meantime, a case filed at the High Court in 2011 on the evictions kept going through a process of postponed dates.

²⁸ The Bypass hawkers were not affiliated with the HSC prior to the evictions of 2012. Even after evictions, not all the evicted spots affiliated with the HSC. According to those spots that did affiliate, this was because some hawkers, including those in front of Avishikta Housing Complex, preferred to put their faith in the Trinamool Congress. The latter, incidentally, are still not back to hawking at that spot. The HSC banners were thus only displayed at the affiliated sites.

If Operation Sunshine had provided at least four different sources from which to interpret the success of the evictions and the resistance that followed, for these un-named evictions I would have to primarily rely on my ethnographic presence in the city and involvement with the HSC since March 2012. To me it was clear that the politics of the HSC had been effective at addressing eviction pressures on its members in more places than had been ineffective in.

For a union of hawkers to stay relevant and effective for this long is no mean feat. In trying to understand how this has come to be, I have found it useful to use two metaphorical lenses with which to view the HSC: one that looks at the politics of the HSC and another that looks at the politics of *organising* of the HSC. This is, ofcourse, a forced differentiation, for in real life both are inter-related and cannot be separated from one another.

1. The politics of the HSC

The first lens focuses on the HSC's interactions with state functionaries and governmental agencies, with other fraternal social and political movements, with the media and civil society intellectuals. This lens blurs out the details of structure, composition, ideological differences etc. of and within the HSC. It sees the HSC as a singular, uniform union of hawkers which elicits recognitions without having to explain its composition, origins etc. This readily recognisable HSC is explainable in one line: largest union of hawkers in Calcutta; independent, powerful, effective.

One could perhaps argue that in Calcutta, the experience of Operation Sunshine paved the way for a new form of politics. It taught the hawkers that they cannot rely solely on their moral claims as part of political society negotiation with the authorities, but that they need a more strident independent organization of their own (HSC). It also showed them that they should demand rights as couched in the new language of entrepreneurship, a language that the millennial state cannot but respond to, and stepped up its campaign for a law.

Its politics involve the building of alliances and connections horizontally and vertically, both within the hawker movement and in allied social movements. It is, for instance, a founding member of the National Hawker Federation which claims to be the largest hawker organization in the country and has recently affiliated with the international union UNI Global Union. The HSC also has strong links with the National Alliance of People's Movements, with unions of agriculture workers in the state, with forums against

Free Trade Agreements, Foreign Direct Investment and other social movements. They were at the forefront of the movements at Singur and Nandigram as well. At the state as well as the national level, the HSC (and the NHF)²⁹ has considerable influence on all official and unofficial policy making with regard to hawkers.

It deploys a confusing array of tactics: from the militancy of reoccupation to the very disciplined non-confrontational protest marches; from asking the bigger questions about the right to the city and the structure of the economy to taking a position that they would not oppose new roads and flyovers as long as hawkers were accommodated within it; from informal negotiations with the state and bureaucracy to a fully fledged local and national campaign for the hawker Bill; from the deployment of court cases and an extensive archive to leveraging support from intellectuals in the civil society space such as Mahasweta Devi and organizations like Nagarik Mancha.

No one aspect or tactic or strategy can be pulled out of the HSC's arsenal and shown to be the driving force of its success and power. At most it can be said that its power comes from its strategic independence, which allows it to engage with any political party, the simultaneous deployment of multiple instruments of struggle, as mentioned above, and the determination to hunker down for a long fight.

The politics of organising of the HSC

The second lens which is a macro lens (magnifying lens) focuses *on* the HSC and blurs out the rest. Doing so is not just a matter of generating more details. It has, instead, more political implications for it allows us to understand the process of unionisation for hawkers better, which has a special relevance in the post-Act world of hawkers in a city. By training the macro lens on the HSC, one is able to see the dynamics that are at play within the hawking community and to challenge somewhat the tendency to homogenise hawkers and see all their problems as one. It allows us to ask the fundamental questions of when, why and what kinds of hawkers tend to seek out unionisation.

1. When do hawkers unionise?

The 'when' is easily answered: hawkers unionise when they are evicted or face the threat of impending eviction. A study done by the organization EQUATIONS in the tourism sector

²⁹ The other significant hawker unions in the county, Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI) have zero to negligible presence in West Bengal.

indicated that hawkers tended to organise themselves at the time of eviction (Singh, et al. 2012). The EQUATIONS study pointed out that it was not necessary, however, for this organization to go beyond issues related to eviction and broader issues of right to livelihood, working conditions and social security tended to not be addressed. Fieldwork amongst the member unions of the HSC seemed to corroborate the conclusion that eviction or the threat of eviction was a key stimulant to organising. This picture is going to get more complicated in the post-Act world. One can already speculate that the motivation to form unions, whether strong or not, would increase when the financial stakes go up, as they will once TVCs are formed across cities.

2. Why do hawkers unionise?

The ‘why’ deserves a little bit more space. Given the ubiquitous presence of political parties in the political space of Calcutta (and West Bengal), one must ask: doesn’t political patronage and electoral politics offer leverage to hawkers? Based on my fieldwork I tentatively offer that yes it does for limited, but not unimportant, local needs (often infrastructural). The threat of eviction is however not something that can be mitigated by political parties (as has been seen since Operation Sunshine). The power to evict lies not solely in the hands of political parties, but is spread out in a more complex web of the municipality, the police, private interests etc.

Member unions were universally of the opinion that the HSC membership was, at the end of the day, a *‘pet-er lorai’*, that it was about filling their bellies and looking after their families, and that political parties only hinder such struggles. No other organization, political party or otherwise, was able to give them security on this front like the HSC. With respect to eviction, all the union organisers stated that local level functionaries and political parties were useless and only the HSC had their back. And yet, this did not mean that they were completely dependent on the HSC for all their needs. Many sites had relationships with political parties and other power lobbies at the local level, whether at the level of the entire market or at the personal level of some hawker leaders at the market. This dual relationship appeared to function more or less fluidly; the hawkers did not feel that they needed to choose one over the other. It was a relationship constantly but comfortably negotiated, especially by those member unions affiliated to parties.

This brings up a related question of how the member unions manage their relationship with local level functionaries and the HSC. The question, in other words, of when the identity

of the member union prevails and when the identity of the HSC prevails. There is a certain fluidity that seems to exist in this relationship. Based on interview responses, it seems that the HSC as an umbrella body does not micro-manage its members who have considerable autonomy with regard to how they function. There are rules that HSC member units have to follow, rules that state for instance that no party banners would be allowed at HSC events, rules that determine how much space and what kind of space hawkers can use, rules about maintaining a level of cleanliness and hygiene around the stalls, and of sticking to the one third of the pavement that the Sodan Singh judgement said rightfully belonged to hawkers. Rules, that is, for a certain discipline. Aside from that it seems to be the prerogative of the member units to determine which hawkers to admit into their fold locally and the rules of membership that will apply at the site. It is also their prerogative to decide what sort of relationship they want with political parties. In most cases, the local needs of hawkers (such as infrastructural support and municipal services like spraying against mosquitoes) prompt the development of a relationship with local level functionaries such as councillors, MLAs, political party workers etc. Sometimes it is also matters less prosaic that lead to such relationships. After all this is Calcutta where *everybody* has a political party that they love or hate with all their heart!

While there seem to be no set rules which determine the relationship of HSC member units with political parties, there is a larger meta-narrative that runs through their responses. A meta-narrative that is captured by the equation of '*pet-er lorai*' with the HSC and that which renders association with political parties into the personal domain. As such, the fall of the Left Front Government and the establishment of the Trinamool Congress government in 2011 does not seem to have adversely impacted the HSC's membership, nor its ability to act for hawkers. There is an awareness, even if not communicated in as many words, that the real regime change happened long ago: the regime change that reordered the logic of the urban space. Now, it does not matter which party is in power, 'only the chair changes' as one organiser pointed out in the aftermath of the evictions of 2011-12.

3. The kinds of hawkers that unionise

With respect to the question of what kinds of hawkers tend to seek out unionisation, I turn to the nature of the membership of the HSC. Stationary, male hawkers operating out of temporary stalls in relatively well established markets (in terms of years) seem to dominate the membership of the HSC. How does one read this? What does this say

about the politics of unionisation within the HSC? Does this indicate that the HSC is interested in a particular kind of membership only and therefore polices its borders? Or can there be some other explanation?

The link between evictions and collective organisation allows us to work backwards to understand the exclusions of the Hawker Sangram Committee. That is:

When do hawkers organise? When they face the threat of eviction.

Which hawkers face the threat of eviction? Those who operate out of temporary stalls.

Which hawkers have stalls? Not women³⁰ and not mobile hawkers...

The exclusions of the HSC can thus be attributed less to active gate-keeping by the leadership and more to the logic that drives collective organization by hawkers. Had it been the former, one would perhaps have come across evidence of the HSC *restricting* membership. However, my fieldwork indicated that the HSC leadership has been trying to include more reluctant hawkers in the folds of the union, including mobile hawkers and women³¹.

The dual structure of the HSC

Choosing to separate the lenses of inquiry into the politics of the HSC and the politics of *organising* of the HSC leaves one with an interesting picture when the two lenses are projected onto the same screen. It creates a composite picture which reveals a dual character of the HSC where member unions maintain parallel relations with political parties and the HSC that do not necessarily converge. Member unions have a life and will of their own, which is not subsumed under the identity and authority of the Hawker Sangram Committee.

This dual relationship helps one understand the corresponding dual structure of the HSC. One part deals with the macro state, intervening on behalf of hawkers and advocating for them through campaigns for a legal regime. This is also the part that expands the scope of hawker politics from just that of eviction by building alliances with fraternal political movements, national and international, on trade issues and issues of agriculture, labour, land

³⁰ Women hawkers tend to trade in less profitable goods like vegetables and tend to not have temporary stalls.

³¹ It constituted a separate women hawker's union on 3 October 2012 called the Women Hawkers Adhikar Sangram Committee, presumably with an eye on the Hawker Act which has a reservation for women.

rights, climate change, amongst others, and also builds larger international connections and campaigns relating to hawking.

The other part of the structure functions through leaders who organise sites. Some of these leaders are full time HSC union leaders who have proactively organised hawkers and/or hawking markets. Some, in the case of central trade union HSC affiliates, are party workers. Some are independent (like the journalist who started organising in New Town) and some are local hawker market leaders. These leaders in fact connect the two structures of the HSC, and make it possible to build a city-wide movement of scattered hawking markets. The rest of the membership at sites tend to not be in regular contact with the HSC (although they are free to do so), and the HSC, too, coordinates with these sites through these leaders.

These site leaders, particularly those who have emerged organically from hawking sites, help negotiate and manage the micro state, building relationships with the police, local power lobbies and the 'dadas' of the neighbourhood to navigate and manage site specific needs.

There is thus within the HSC a distinctive division of roles and labour, a dual structure that separately pursues agendas related to hawking with the macro state and micro state. Hawkers need both because hawking is, at the end of the day, a business, an economic activity. In order to just be able to carry out their livelihood in peace, which was the universal end-goal verbalised during my fieldwork, they have requirements from both, the macro and the micro state. Recognising and acting upon this has been the unique contribution of the Hawker Sangram Committee to hawker politics.

Conclusion

It is beyond the scope of this paper to apply this reading of the HSC into an imagination of the post-Act world of hawkers. Will the legalisation of hawking be a boon or a bane for hawking populations in cities? Will non-unionised hawkers be left far behind as unionised ones flex their muscles and claim space in the designated hawking zones, and claim whatever benefits are planned by the Town Vending Committees? Will the streets of Calcutta really look very different once the zoning system is implemented?

These are not questions that can be answered immediately. The process of TVC formation is already underway in some cities like Mumbai and Delhi and has been quite messy so far. For one, the TVCs themselves don't seem to understand how they are going to

start work, a major hurdle being the methodology they are going to adopt to map and register hawkers. For another, there is the matter of in-fighting and corruption. Seema Dhiman, an NHF organiser from Delhi who is a member of the East Municipal Corporation of Delhi TVC, told me that '*kanoon ke bad laraiya bar gayein hai*' (in-fighting amongst hawker unions has increased after the Act). There have been rumours of big money exchanging hands for TVC membership and a real concern that hawker representatives on the TVCs do not really represent hawker organisations.

However, while the post-Act world would not necessarily be utopic, as hawker organisers themselves admit, it need not be dystopic either. For one, the process of struggle would continue to ensure favourable interpretation and implementation of the Act. And for another, John Cross shows in the case of Mexico City that multiple unions in a city space and the rivalries generated therewith end up not detracting from the hawker cause but actually extracting more from the state (Cross 1998).

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