

Chapter 7

Are Informal Economic Spaces of Street-Vending Sights of ‘Disorderly Urban Environments’ and Sprawl? A Case Study on Hawkers of Kolkata



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Abstract While an ever-increasing and economically marginalised urban population is a principal constitutive element when thinking about urban sprawl, another significant element is the embodied aspiration of the growing Indian Middle Class to live in a ‘world-class city’. In this chapter, we aim to explore the political economy framework on how class-animated city spaces lead to newer images of urban frontiers eluding the realities of sprawl and disorder that they constitute. Informal economic activity by the vendors is seen as a spilling ‘hazard’ by middle-class citizens, who believe that public spaces like streets, pavements and parks should be hygienic and spectacular, and enhance the quality of urban life. With its omnipresent role in redefining the legitimacy of ‘worlding cities’, the neoliberal state is usually at odds with the vendors’ interests and makeshift vending spaces. Nevertheless, at the same time, it concurs with growing motorised vehicles, redundant infrastructures and ‘spectacular’ high-rises to accomplish its goal of ‘accumulation by dispossession’. In this article, drawing on an intersectional conceptual framework and empirical observations from street vending in Kolkata, we trace a route to look into urban environments as subsumed within popular mass politics and not as a linearly ecological category. We establish that street-based livelihood activities, despite being popularly seen as sprawl and a ‘city-hazard’, formatively proliferate through powerfully shaped strategies of politics and governmentality.

Keywords Informality · Street vendors · Kolkata · Urban sprawl · Environments

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Introduction

This work explores a discursive frame of urban environmental consciousness, influencing ‘the public discourses on spaces, practices and population’ (Bandyopadhyay 2011, p. 297). To this end, it positions street vendors as steady actors within the informal economic sector of a city. Street vendors, commonly known as hawkers in India, offer a range of goods and services primarily to the middle and marginal classes of the city, often at affordable and pocket-friendly prices. The National Policy on Urban Street Vendors (2009) states that hawkers or street vendors are ‘self-employed workers in the urban informal sector, who offer their labour for selling goods and services without any permanent built-up structure’. City streets, sidewalks, overpasses, markets and pavements are ideal spaces where hawkers settle for sale, often in temporary, static, or makeshift structures. Hawkers constitute an essential and significant part of the urban landscape of India yet are often threatened, dispossessed, harassed and evicted. This treatment of the hawkers partly owes to a vision of city planning and beautification which considers urban informal economies as illegitimate and therefore problematic—broadly, a planning perspective that regards informal economies as ‘distortion of public space’ and a kind of urban sprawl and public nuisance (Onodugo et al. 2016, pp. 95–96; Bandyopadhyay 2015).

A significant section of government administrative techniques, coupled with class-animating elite visions of urban environmentalism, acts to engage proactively in the constitution of civic and orderly city spaces. Baviskar (2011) points out that the mission of ‘cleaning up’ city streets often targets the urban marginals, including street vendors, beggars and performers. Mainstream literature on urban studies focuses on a larger vision of ‘worlding cities’; they examine models of Asian urbanism in determining prospective turns towards post-colonialism and aligned articulations of developmental pathways infused by power and authoritarian knowledge (Roy 2009, p. 308). Such powerfully shared visions of neoliberal globalisation in modern cities restrict informal economic activities to a large extent, leaving the urban poor with little leeway apart from contestations, resistance and political mobilisation—popular mass politics become the only emancipatory weapons. The process of staking claims to spaces in cities with predominant environmental agendas necessitates deeper engagements with the very nature of subaltern negotiations (Bandyopadhyay 2011, 2015).

The chapter aims to extend the analytical focus of the city worlding process by explaining how pre-eminent and politicised environmental agendas in cities animate spaces of informality. A systematic shaping of the urban environment by the middle class through widespread public debates on environmental issues and parallelly emerging strong representation in the media, politics, scientific establishment, NGOs, bureaucracy, environmental institutions and the legal system has led to the construction of an urban environmental activism, with significant civic disregard to issues of social justice, and inequalities (Mawdsley 2004, p. 81; Baviskar 2011). Gentrified and middle-class-animating city spaces and the larger vision of ‘urban ecological planning’ dislodges informal economic actors in the city, like street vendors (Basu

and Nagendra 2020). Such a disregard is omnipresent when it comes to street vending spaces in a city, which are contested not only because they lack legal status but also because they deplete the health, hygiene and ‘environment’ of the city (Harvey 2009; Baviskar 2011; Pakalapati 2010). We also show that neoliberal models of urban development have agentialised a range of local, regional and transnational actors in creating new environmental politics and novel forms of communal organisation leveraging urban institutions (Kashwan et al. 2019).

We argue how an exclusive focus on ecological urbanism has led to a distinctive social production of the city’s nature that disproportionately benefits many urban residents (Heynen et al. 2006). Street vending is often seen as a ‘hazard’ to middle-class citizens, who believe that public spaces like streets, pavements and parks should be cleared of sprawl and look hygienic and spectacular and enhance the quality of life (Baviskar 2011). The street vending spaces in Kolkata, where this work is empirically positioned, had become a contested arena following ‘Operation Sunshine’ in 1996, the biggest drive in the city to ‘clean’ specific locations of hawkers by evicting thousands of them who encroached landmark pavements of the city. Such physical reproduction of urban spaces towards visible improvements of its ‘quality’ embeds nature in political economy and power relations, revealing how structural and institutional contexts influence resource users’ claims to space (Veron 2006). This critical line of inquiry will be centrally addressed in this work. In doing so, we would broadly trace a route to investigate urban nature as a socio-political rather than a linearly ecological category, where street-based livelihood activities, despite being popularly seen as a ‘city hazard’ formatively proliferates through powerfully shaped strategies of politics and governmentality. The conceptual focus of the paper would be on the urban environment as being linked to domains of informality, rights, class structures, citizenship and politics. We would then empirically explore how street vending as a prevalent economic activity positions itself within strategic engagements with urban environmentalism, often through ‘a state of exception that it embodies’ (Roy 2005, p. 147). Through an immersed ethnographic description, the plight of the street vendors today, as we show, adds rigour to the neat epistemic contours of middle-class environmentalism in the city through an elaboration of the role of contemporary political society. In the discussions, we would offer an exploration around an effective investigation of the urban environment as a sociological-political category.

Informality, City Streets and Environmental Framings

A promising range of urban history in different places of South Asia has witnessed the engineering of removal of much of the working class from the city centres and how urbanisation has a crucial role to play in the very absorption of capital surpluses (Harvey 2008). Often by demolishing informal settlements and seizing the land, the state can privatise public spaces and thereby creates and recreates these shifting categories of ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ to suit the needs of corporate groups and for private

profit (Baviskar 2011). In contemporary times, Roy (2009) encourages us to think about 'new geographies of imagination' that would enable us to understand multiple forms of metropolitan modernity produced out of the capital surpluses in third-world cities. A work drawing on Chatterjee (2004) captures this idea on modernity: 'often dismissed as the rumblings of 'the street', popular politics is where political modernity is being formed today'.¹ As an instance, Shaw and Colombijn (2009) mention that Kolkata lies at the intersection of two kinds of modernities. Historically precolonial towns were frequently conquered and transformed to fulfil European colonial powers' need. In a similar light, Kolkata, the colonial capital at one point in history, was transformed to suit the needs of the British Raj. But after independence, the city is being remoulded differently to suit the needs of the dominant sections of society and is exhibiting a new form of metropolitan modernity. Nevertheless, today's city still bears considerable remnants of the city's colonial past (Shaw and Colombijn 2009). Scholars have now become interested in theorising 'global cities' or investing in the world cities approach, which generally seeks to understand the position of cities within the world economy. But the problem is that many cities are excluded based on being 'economically irrelevant' (Robinson 2002). These methodologies have a bias towards Western cities, and if one is to break free from these classifications, steps must be taken to decolonise the area of urban studies.

Urban informality has become a way of life in numerous cities across the globe where there are high rates of urbanisation and poverty (Birch 2019). Scholarly writing on 'informality' as a concept can be traced back to the work of Keith Hart, an anthropologist associated with the International Labour Organisation (ILO). In 1973, during his visit to Ghana, he came across workers who came to the city from villages to offer their services as day labourers. This was quite different from the organised markets of England, which he was used to seeing, and it prompted him to distinguish the formal from the informal. Hart also believed that certain features like low skill level, easy entry, low wages and an immigrant workforce characterised the informal sector. Informality has become a common feature in the post-colonial Third World due to systemic borrowing of urban planning techniques from the developed world and then trying to fit the same design as successful tropes of urbanisation modelling. Roy (2005, p. 148) suggests that it is useful to think about informality as 'a mode of urbanisation'. She transcends the formal/informal dichotomy and sees it as 'a series of transactions that connect different economies and spaces to one another' (Roy 2005, p. 148).

There are two dominant views when it comes to informality. Informality is either presented as a problem or celebrated in debates (Banks et al. 2020). It is often considered an unplanned reality that needs to be regulated. Otherwise, it is seen as a celebration of marginalised groups who exist amidst social, economic, political and geographical exclusion. As illustrated in the work later, street vendors have been seen to negotiate their terms of informality by adopting innovative strategies for their survival. In China, for example, the term 'informality' is constantly being

¹ <http://cup.columbia.edu/book/the-politics-of-the-governed/9780231130639>.

redefined to meet the government’s political objectives (Xue and Huang 2015)—here, street vending is not prohibited, but it has a relatively unstable status that is tolerated selectively. The need for maintaining an attractive city image and the necessity to address people’s livelihood are managed through the act of permitting and prohibiting hawking in various locations. The extent to which a social practice like street vending is permissible depends on what the state desires at that time. Another instance is given by Crossa (2009), who writes about the Entrepreneurial Urban Governance (EUG) in Mexico City, which aims to revitalise and enhance the streets, buildings and the central plaza of the city’s Historic Center. However, the EUG creates socio-spatial exclusions, such as the construction of gated communities and the commercialisation of public space, raising serious concerns regarding citizens’ right to the city. Although violent struggles have taken place, the street vendors of Mexico City have shown a unique method of resistance called ‘torear’. Against the backdrop of the displacement that has taken place of the hawkers from the Historic Center, some vendors have returned to the streets by engaging in ‘torear’. Torear is what bullfighters do to tease or deceive the bull. So, rather than erecting a metal stall on the street and making one’s presence visible, street vendors sell goods on the same street by becoming mobile. These examples are crucial as they allow us to examine the boundaries of informality in the global south and if they can be stretched to lay claim to urban environmental politics, which has become one of its strengths.

The claim-making to streets, city spaces and, most importantly, class-driven urban environments provide a context for this study. According to Fernandes and Heller (2006), the new middle class in India may be seen as a class-in-practice, meaning that it is characterised by its politics and everyday actions, which allow it to reproduce its privileged position. They argue that the dominating segment of the middle class plays a crucial role in the politics of hegemony. Baviskar (2011) uses the term ‘bourgeois environmentalism’ to conceptualise the middle-class pursuit of order, hygiene and ecological conservation. She explores how the urban elite claims to speak for the entire city through the discourses of public interest and citizenship. This activism which is neither guided by ecological sustainability nor social justice produces a form of exclusionary urbanism (Sahoo 2016). A very similar understanding is put forward by Ghertner (2015), who writes about ‘nuisance talk’. The everyday depictions of informal settlements as dirty, uncivil and out of place through speech acts or sensory vocabulary construct particular objects as a ‘nuisance’. The urban elite thus try to eliminate the poor whom they consider to be a ‘nuisance’ and construct them as obstacles to the ‘world-city’ making process. In his work, the ‘culture of illegality’ is significant as being a part of the nuisance talk that associates the squatters, hawkers and other sections of the urban poor with vote bank politics. Anjaria (2009) talks about how resident welfare associations formed by the Indian middle class render the political claims of street hawkers ‘illegitimate’ and reconfigure the nature of citizenship. Public Interest Litigations (PIL) filed by elite residents in Delhi High courts have also started to play a significant role in shaping urban environmental transformations. PILs have the power to reconfigure the nature of citizenship of slum dwellers by constructing them as dishonest citizens who do not have to pay for land or a flat (Bhan 2009). In a similar vein, Brosius (2010), citing the example

of Delhi, examines how contemporary urban India might be studied within this context of leisure, aspirations and modes of consumption. Sanyal's influential work on *Rethinking Capitalist Development* provides a strong argument to substantiate how underdevelopment, expulsions and exclusions are 'castaways of development'—it is an essential condition of capital's existence and exercise of specific technologies of power to the detriment of the underprivileged (2007, p. 47).

But are environmental concerns indeed only the domain of the middle class? There is a view that the poor may be too preoccupied with meeting their basic needs for subsistence to worry about environmental concerns (Bell 2020, p. 140). Bell (2020) states that Inglehart's post-materialist values theory, the 'affluence hypotheses', and the Environmental Kuznets Curve (EKC) serve only to reinforce these ideas. However, the poor have a long, hidden history of protecting the environment. They have always defended the environment because they know their livelihoods, welfare and survival depend on it. Environmental classism has given us a very narrow definition of the environment. For example, the more affluent sections of the society might focus on recycling and buying green for the greater good of the environment. But the poor are able to consume fewer resources and generate a significantly lower amount of waste than the upper or middle class. They are not environmentalists in need but 'environmentalists in deed' (Bell 2020, p. 145). In the case of street vendors, we notice how these groups also interact with the environment in exciting ways. Scholarly writing often overlooks street vendors' and hawkers' relations with the urban ecosystem. Green spaces in the city provide hawkers with spiritual, economic and cultural functions (Basu and Nagendra 2020). Access to trees and availability of shade make their strenuous livelihoods more bearable in the summer months. So, what is at stake is not simply the 'right to the city' but also the 'right to shade'. It is not unusual to see a barber who sets up his salon by attaching a mirror to a tree trunk in the streets of Kolkata. Street trees thus help the vendors in many direct and indirect ways. Often, trees are used to hang signs with sale prices to attract customers. The branches and the trunks are also used to display goods. Working in the same spot for years, they tend to develop an emotional connection with the trees. Some species of trees are considered lucky for business growth by these vendors. In this context, what becomes important is how hawkers attach a sense of place to their built environment. Gieryn (2000) describes how 'place' has three essential characteristics: its geographical location, material form and its associated meaning. Understanding the difference between space and place is critical because space is what a place becomes when its distinctive value and meaning are stripped away. When individuals extract a defined, identifiable, meaningful and significant place from a continuous and abstract space, they create a sense of place (Sen and Nagendra 2019). Due to public space enclosures and eviction threats, these sentiments are continually in danger.

However, there are many strategies of popular mass politics that the vendors adopt in their everyday lives to pull back efforts of exclusion and dispossession from the city. One is that of negotiation. Schindler (2014a, b) writes about how street vendors maintain access to public space through negotiation with non-state actors who control space at the micro-scale. He goes on to write about the struggles of the hawkers' claim to space in the face of multiple governance regimes, like the municipality and the

civil society organisations, which lay claim to public space to transform Indian cities into world-class cities. Through this theorisation, we realise that power is dispersed and that a diverse range of non-state actors participate in governance regimes and seek to control these ‘out-of-place’ populations. Another very interesting way that the urban marginals in the developing world fight back and assert their claims is through what Bayat (2000, p. 545) calls ‘quiet encroachment of the ordinary’. The notion of quiet encroachment describes the silent way ordinary people encroach on the property of the powerful to survive and improve their lifestyles. One example of this is the tapping of electricity from municipal power poles. This way, the authorities are forced to extend urban services to these neighbourhoods.

Similarly, street vendors encroach on public space and subsequently challenge the idea of the orderly modern city and urban governance imposed on them by the urban elites. What must be remembered is that this act of quiet encroachment is not always political but is done out of necessity. Modernity is costly and unfortunately not everyone can afford to be modern (Bayat 2000). Public space is partly what makes cities (Bodnar 2015). Nevertheless, this experience is now under threat. But as the city becomes more of a ‘spectacle’, the sense of the city as a body politic gradually gets lost (Harvey 2006). Public streets and sidewalks are all that are left as sites of public expression. They are also sites where poverty and inequality are most visible. It is thus imperative to ask how and why political participation can occur in an urban world where space is privatised, commoditised and segregated.

Field Context and Methodology

In this work, we adopted a qualitative approach since it describes and analyses the quality and substance of human experience in detail (Marvasti 2004) as an imperative to explore links between informality and urban environmental concerns. This methodology would be most suitable for this study as we wish to comprehend how our respondents understand the world around them and give meaning to their subjective experiences. An urban ethnography would be an ideal method for learning and uncovering the dynamics of different marginal groups that inhabit the city. Ethnography is a research method that involves a series of qualitative techniques of social investigation (Imilan and Marquez 2019). Frequently, in-depth interviews and observation are employed by investigators to gather information about the subject. Western societies have practised ethnography for years to understand the ‘other’ or non-western societies by learning their language, building rapport and staying with the natives in their societies. Urban ethnography has made a distinctive contribution to the analysis of ethnicity and class (Jackson 1985). Although the territorial dimension significantly impacts these groups, the subject’s experiences must be examined in the light of how broader urban social institutions intersect with their lives. The context of the city and how it is shaped by different state and non-state actors is crucial for this study. We wish to see through fieldwork how these individuals actively produce space

and construct a sense of place, altogether redefining what is meant by the ‘urban experience’ in cities of the global south.

Using urban ethnography, the first author interviewed 14 street vendors from two prime vending zones in Kolkata—Tollygunge in South Kolkata and College Street in North Kolkata. This fieldwork was conducted in January 2022–February 2022. Another rich data source was the Calcutta Hawker Sangram Committee (HSC), a union of more than 70 local hawkers’ associations. Alongside this, the first author spoke to the Calcutta Street Hawker’s Union members, which is affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). The interviews were mostly kept unstructured so that respondents could freely express their thoughts and opinions. Respondents were selected based on snowball sampling. A snowball sample is built from subjects who are suggested by previous subjects (Baker 1994). In this way, it is possible to accumulate the names of other people who have the qualities we seek for the work. However, using this method can create difficulty in having an equal representation of men, women, young people and the elderly, which could prove to be one of the limitations of this approach in the long run. This issue can be addressed by a longitudinal approach—repeated visits and protracted involvement with the field actors.

Street Vendors and Articulations Around Urban Environment in Selected Areas of Kolkata

In June 2016, in the Baruiপুর area, the Railway Protection Force (RPF) was reported to evict several hawkers with ‘illegal’ shops in and around the station premises. Hindu, a popular Indian daily, reported,²

Protests erupted in the morning when RPF personnel reached the spot. Soon after the eviction started, approximately 1,000 hawkers owing allegiance to the Indian National Trinamool Trade Union Congress (INTTUC), the labour wing of the Trinamool Congress, gathered at the spot. “Things took a violent turn when a Railway official was thrown down to the ground and assaulted allegedly by the protesters”.

In 2017, there was a similar eviction drive in the Salt Lake area, where 3000 odd hawkers were evicted from footpaths due to the FIFA U-17 World Cup. However, due to a lack of cooperation from the local MLA, the mayor of Bidhannagar Municipal Corporation was unable to hold back the hawkers for a long time, and they eventually returned.³ Sometime later in 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a mass eviction of hawkers from Kalakar street for systematic traffic movement in the Burrabazar area. As reported by Times of India (TOI), ‘the idea is to reclaim the

² <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/Hawker-eviction-drive-turns-violent-in-Kolkata/article14384662.ece>.

³ <https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/hawkers-back-in-business-in-salt-lake/cid/1692874>.

footpath for pedestrians. This will allow more road space for the traffic. However, it will be a long-term plan and will need some time to be fully executed’.⁴

In one of the interviews with the Hawker Sangram Committee (HSC), one of their grassroots leaders highlighted that,

Many newspapers, especially the Ananda Bazaar Patrika wrote about how consuming street food is unsafe and unhygienic....that there would be food poisoning, cholera, and typhoid since the food is cooked beside the roads where there is dirt and pollution. So they would use pictures to scare people...so that they do not come to our stalls.

This interview shows us how the middle class, with their representation in media, can effectively use the newspaper to bring about the changes they desire. Baviskar (2018) correctly points out that the power to frame something as a problem, and in this case, a ‘health and hygiene concern’ does not lie with the marginalised since both social and cultural capital are required to articulate and legitimise something as a ‘problem’. This particular way of the middle class helps them avoid a direct confrontation and is more subtle and insidious in nature. While the urban populations of the informal sector organise themselves through what Chatterjee (2004) calls the ‘political society’, the urban elite take the apolitical route of civil society (Chatterji and Roy 2016).

Evictions of street vendors from numerous such streets of Kolkata have been reasonably frequent. On a particular day, during the commencement of the fieldwork, the first author on her way back, sat down to have some lemon tea, and started talking with the vendor casually. It was a spontaneous conversation, and he wanted to remain anonymous after knowing about the research. He mentioned that he might be the oldest hawker on that footpath right now by profession. However, the very stall was not there initially.

You must have heard of *Sulabh Apartments* – I used to have my stall there. One day, we heard that the roads were being remade and there would be concrete pavements for that apartment complex. For that reason, I was evicted. There was no one to help me and I moved because I had to move. After that I came here, now my stall is shabby and small – nothing compared to what I had. During the pandemic – I was not able to give my payments here for three months - then the union people cut the black plastic sheets above my head and took the small stools. The protectors often prey on us (*Jara rokhok tarai toh bhokhok*). I’m not afraid to talk about these union folks like others. This is a slow and painful torture for me (*‘Eta ke na ami ekta slow otyachar mone kori’*). It is not that one day I will come and find that my stall has disappeared - rather little by little, items will go missing, my stall will be vandalised and then I will be either forced to pay up or leave the area. Also, these sheets and stools are quite expensive and only I know how I can still be able to make ends meet. None of my family members have studied that much – out of them one is a ‘neuro patient’ whose treatment had to be stopped due to lack of funds. During the Amphan cyclone, I got no ration or money. Some people here got money or gas cylinder for cooking. But I did not get anything. Therefore, I believe that compared to the other vendors here - I am quite weak because I do not have much power (*‘Ami nijeke komjor mone kori’*).

⁴ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/cops-on-hawker-eviction-drive-at-kalakarstreet/articleshow/86149610.cms>.

Interviews like these expose the realities behind the neat articulations of conflict that presumably exist within the larger discourses of informality. A large part of these ‘street rumblings’, as Chatterjee (2004) writes, are evocations of mass politics operating outside the ‘formal legal institutions of the state’ (ibid.). In another instance, the first author interviewed another vendor having a family of three who has been vending since 1996 and is a registered member of the local vending union. When asked about governmental assistance, he mentioned that they are getting ration for free, and sometimes the union would give some rice and potatoes. Once the government promised them 2000 rupees—while some people did receive the amount, the majority did not. During the pandemic, as he mentioned, he subsisted by borrowing money or loaning money. He said,

We have to eat. My daughter’s school fees also had to be paid. We borrowed money from our relative but are paying our dues back slowly.

He mentioned that vending spaces in these areas could only be established with the Union’s permission. They must write a letter and then acquire permission and then can one set up a stall in that area. He said earlier, during the 1990s, vendors like him faced regular eviction. ‘*Police would come at night and we would have to pack all our stuff and take everything back with us. Now it is not there*’.

When asked about any complaints that they might have received regarding encroachment of public space, the respondent mentioned,

See this footpath may be a public space but we maintain it very well. There is a good distance between our stalls and the pedestrians. Like in Gariahat and Kudhghat – they don’t do it very well. They occupy too much space. But we can balance it well. We leave a lot of space in between for people to walk in.

During a discussion about the instances of road-widening and hawkers’ evictions from the footpaths of Kolkata, he said,

We can’t say for sure what will happen then. The government will talk with the unions before they make such a move. Whatever negotiations they make – we will not be able to know. But if they remove my stall from here – My world will drown (*‘Amar Shongshar ta bheshe jabe’*) I have been here all my life. I am 50+. I cannot do anything – I can’t cycle – since with age our ability for physical labour also goes away... after all.

If the government wants to keep a beautiful and clean environment in the city, they have to keep us in that environment too. (*‘Shob kichu rekhe cholte hobe kintu’*)

I do not understand the concept of ruining someone’s life and livelihood for city beautification. Who will be left to see your beautiful city if you evict so many people? (*‘Karor shonshar nosto kore poribesh sundor korata ami bujhina. Ei je eto lok ke tule diye shohor je sundor korcho – tahole dekhbe kara?’*)

These people are now coming and buying things- after this extended lockdown – they are chatting, having tea & cigarettes, some people are having egg roll & chowmein. If beautification happens – all these things will disappear. There will only be bright lights – but this crowd will not be there– people will get robbed – things will get stolen. (*‘Light jolbe shudhu ar kebol Churi Chintai barbe’*.)

Keep everyone and make the city beautiful. (*‘Shobai ke rekhe sundor koro’*.)

Feelings of uncertainty, insecurity and marginalisation in otherwise spectacular cities are often dealt with through constant political negotiations around the claims towards space. The respondent also echoes the words of Jane Jacobs (2015) where she highlighted how sidewalks perform many other functions besides carrying pedestrians. She believed that lively streets make a city attractive—the ‘eyes on the street’ creates safe spaces, especially for women and children. On the other hand, the problem is most serious, in fact, in genteel-looking ‘quiet residential areas’ (Jacobs 2015).

A hawker who sells readymade garments in Bhawanipore mentioned that he has been in this profession for 40 years. During the pandemic lockdown COVID-19 lockdown, he had to close his business. He said, *‘They were not letting us open our shops. In the beginning, we were trying to sell masks and then we were harassed. The police seized all the items we were selling. We got little help from our unions, but that’s about it. We had no money’*. He adds:

This has been happening from a long time back. For example, in Harish Mukherjee Road near PG Hospital, we were given no notice and then forced to leave one day. When the West Bengal Government first came to power, within one year, the then- Chief Minister came and stood in front of Gokhale Memorial and threatened the hawkers by saying that with his power, if he wished to clean up the streets, it would take him just a day to do so. (*‘Ami Bagher bacha, proyojon mone korle ek din e puro rasta saf kore dite pari!’*) Then we protested by *Gherao*— you will find this in the papers. We did win that battle which is why you will still find hawkers in that area.

The first author asked him to elaborate on his idea of the environment, and he responded:

By this, we mean our surroundings. We want to be free from the smoke of cars and factories – this is what we want in our environment. In Kalighat, there is a *shoshan* (crematorium), and smoke comes from there. I grew up in Bhawanipore & at night when we were growing up – we used to live in an area where we used to get that smell all night – of dead bodies being cremated.

A 50-year-old stationary vendor whose tea stall is located in the locality of Jubilee Park, Tollygunge, said that he had recently shifted to this profession, and he is the first in his family to become a hawker. He supports a family of four by selling grocery items, tea, tiffin and cigarettes in his shop. When asked, whether the police had ever come and caused trouble for him, he replied, ‘there were obstacles—but those were created by the people who lived here—not the police’. He was hesitant to talk about which residents had harassed him when he was putting up his stall and informed that he cannot disclose or take names as it might create problems for him. For him, ‘public’ means *‘sarkarer’* (it belongs to the government) and a place is private if it is rented to someone. It must be mentioned here that this seemed to be the dominant notion in most of the interviews. A 36-year-old vegetable vendor who was having tea at his stall joined the discussion enthusiastically, and he said,

This tea stall we are sitting at is a public place, and what is inside that building (pointing to an apartment nearby) is private.

He added that he was allowed to sell his vegetables near the pavement of a massive apartment complex in that area but was never allowed to enter through its gate. It was challenging to figure out who permitted the tea stall owner to put up his shop in that locality since he mentioned that he had no union registration. Although he was unwilling to take anyone's name, the residents of that area did not shy away from mentioning that his stall was put up by some local 'dada' of the All-India Trinamool Congress party. On being asked what he understood by the word 'environment'—he said that he believed that the environment is something that is associated with the feelings of good or bad—like '*bhalo poribesh*' (good environment) or '*kharap poribesh*' (bad environment). Before leaving, he mentioned that he received many threats while setting up the stall and that now things are better—but in the future, he could be evicted—and he could not say with certainty that he was out of danger.

Discussions

While many of the interviews speak about the competing environmental agendas, where we see many of the street vendors understand city environments as a part of their everyday lives, most of them, even when licenced, speak about everyday challenges like workplace insecurity, harassment, confiscation of merchandise and assets (Roever and Skinner 2016, p. 359). However, analysing these interviews was a particularly fascinating composition of the 'everydayness' of their struggles amidst cities in their progress for 'worlding' and environmental order. These struggles, while not exclusionary, are constituted by dominant political explanations—supplication and patron-clientelism are critical and integral ingredients of their powerful strategies to roll back wide-scale evictions and harassments, as many mentioned upfront. A locally powerful nexus of authorities and predominant political patronage networks integrally linked to electorally driven mandates draw together broader approaches to understand the plight of informality and their positions in the growing megacities of India (Roever and Skinner 2016, pp. 364–365). In a fascinating article, Cuvi (2016) writes about the case of the survival of street vendors of Sao Paulo as an 'informal constituency' (p. 396)—how the street vendors earn 'tolerances' or 'forbearance' by paying bribes to street-level officials as well as to certain mid-ranking administrators and how in other cases they resort to supporting local candidates with votes and rallies during electoral campaigns (p. 398).

Regarding environmental questions, most cases of environmental restoration targeted spectacular pedestrian experiences in the cities of Kolkata and were achieved through cleaning the visible nuisance sights, like those of pavement dwellings and street vendors. However, a hierarchy also prevents all hawkers from having equal access to green and open spaces. Due to multiple redevelopment projects and gentrification, street trees are seen getting enclosed within the walls of private property—spaces that were once preferred and used by vendors. As a result, trees have become a rare and private resource, and those with power can access them more easily. This

also tells us that urban redevelopment always has winners and losers (Banks et al. 2020).

Our goal was to understand how the city’s middle-class citizens and hawkers are drawn together on questions on the environment, the impacts of such environmental concerns and what would count as ‘environment’ for different classes within the city. We must rethink who the ‘urban and civic public’ are and how they lay claims to city spaces. Through our study, we can derive that what comes under regulation concerning the hawkers is the ‘spatial’ aspect and not the trade aspect (Bandyopadhyay 2015). It is not the profession, but the public space that one settles down on that becomes the object of contestation. It needs to be mentioned here that the word ‘public’ does not have a literal translation in Bengali, as many interviews suggest. The most important concept that the middle-class elites learned from the British was the distinction between the public and private (Kaviraj 1997). The distinction that the Bengali community was familiar with was that of Ghare/Baire which was the ‘home’ and ‘the outside’. Social space was thus used to map inside/outside and the public/private. However, in the minds of the poor, as the interviews show, anything that was not private was ‘public’. This meant that places from where they could not be evicted by somebody’s right to property could potentially become public spaces, where they could settle in. However, it needs to be acknowledged that beyond the political battles of the informal workers against the elite-driven evictions, the formal economy and the growing middle and upper-middle class need the informal sector. Multiple street food stalls around the ‘*office para*’ (neighbourhoods of various offices) in Kolkata and roadside shops of consumer goods pull in a large segment of the demand from the domain of the seemingly ‘informal’, catering to the middle class itself. Schindler (2014a, b) explains how the poor help enable Delhi’s transformation into a world-class city. In fact, the new middle class needs the informal service sector (ISS) to sustain their affluent lifestyles. In this way, the urban poor have been pulled into the ISS as drivers, security guards and maids so that the middle class can exhibit their economic capital and affirm their class membership.

Similarly, Parthasarathy’s work (2017) demonstrates how global flows of capital and economic shifts may give marginalised people new opportunities that could have emancipatory or empowering implications on them. For instance, business process outsourcing (BPO) and software firms, where the majority of employees work at night and serve clients in various time zones, have opened up new avenues for street vendors. The street vendors now modify their timings to provide services at particular hours according to the changing demands. According to him, ‘new vendors and hawkers are gaining economic opportunities as the ‘time–space compression’ at a global level may lead to a ‘time–space expansion’ locally. (Parthasarathy 2017, p.44)’.

Conclusions

To sum up, this chapter helped us to re-examine politics as an agency and dimension in spaces where environmental claims around urban public spaces are evidently exclusionary. In several instances of city beautification, a technical aestheticised focus on urban greening has undermined local community livelihoods (Sen et al. 2021, pp. 120–121). Related to this is the imagination of a relatively homogenous urban community possessing shared aspirations and interests, which needs a reversal. Urban communities in the global south are far more heterogeneous and discourses around rights to the urban environment require engagement with these ideas of complexity, disparity, inequity and power imbalance.

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