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Social Security Provisions of Street Vendors: A Study with Special Reference to Kolkata, West Bengal

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Abstract

This study focuses on the challenges faced by street vendors in Kolkata, West Bengal, and their important role in the city's economy. Street vendors are a crucial part of daily life in Kolkata, providing affordable goods and services to many people, especially those with lower incomes. However, despite their contributions, street vendors often face significant difficulties. These include legal issues, such as the lack of proper licenses, social problems like discrimination, and economic challenges, including unstable incomes. The research will explore the history of street vending in Kolkata, the impact of the city's growth on these vendors, and how well the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, has been applied. By using methods like surveys and interviews, the study aims to understand the real-life experiences of street vendors, identifying the main problems they encounter. The findings will shed light on the gaps in current policies and suggest ways to improve the situation for street vendors.

Keywords: Street Vendors, Urban Informality, Kolkata, Socio-Economic Challenges, Policy Implementation.

1. Introduction

Street vending is a vital part of the informal economy in many cities across the world, particularly in developing countries like India. In Kolkata, West Bengal, street vendors play a crucial role in the daily lives of millions of residents by providing affordable goods and services. However, despite their contributions, street vendors face numerous challenges that threaten their livelihoods and well-being. These challenges include legal, social, and economic issues, all of which are exacerbated by the rapid urbanization of Kolkata (Hamidu & Munishi, 2022).

This study seeks to examine the crisis faced by street vendors in Kolkata, focusing on their role in the city's economy, the challenges they encounter, and the measures needed to protect their rights and livelihoods. By exploring these aspects, the study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the issues facing street vendors and to propose recommendations for creating a more inclusive urban environment.

Street vending in Kolkata has a long history, deeply rooted in the city's socio-economic fabric. The practice dates back to the colonial era, when street vendors began to emerge as a response to the growing demand for affordable goods and services among the city's working-class population. Over time, the number of street vendors in Kolkata increased significantly, driven by factors such as urbanization, unemployment, and the lack of formal job opportunities(Akhter & Cameron, 2023).

Despite their long-standing presence in the city, street vendors have traditionally been marginalized and subjected to various forms of discrimination and harassment. This has been particularly evident in the way urban planning and development policies have been implemented, often prioritizing the needs of formal businesses and real estate over those of street vendors.

Street vendors are a key component of Kolkata's informal economy, providing employment to a large number of people and offering a wide range of goods and services at affordable prices. Their contributions to the local economy can be understood in several ways:

Employment Generation: Street vending is a significant source of employment for many people, particularly those with low levels of education and skills. It provides an opportunity for self-employment, enabling individuals to earn a livelihood and support their families.

Affordable Goods and Services: Street vendors offer a wide variety of products, including food, clothing, household items, and more, at prices that are often lower than those in formal retail stores. This makes their goods and services accessible to low-income households, who rely on street vendors for their daily needs.

Flexibility and Convenience: Street vendors operate in various locations across the city, making their goods and services easily accessible to consumers. Their flexibility in terms of location and operating hours adds to the convenience they offer to customers.

Contribution to Urban Culture: Street vendors contribute to the vibrancy and diversity of Kolkata's urban culture. The presence of street markets and vendors adds to the city's unique character and provides a dynamic environment that attracts both residents and tourists.

Despite these significant contributions, street vendors in Kolkata face a multitude of challenges that threaten their ability to sustain their livelihoods(Joshua Paul Moses & Pavala Kumar, 2023).

Street vendors in Kolkata encounter a range of challenges that can be broadly categorized into legal, social, economic, and infrastructural issues.

Lack of Legal Recognition: Many street vendors operate without legal recognition, making them vulnerable to eviction, fines, and harassment by law enforcement agencies. The absence of proper licenses and permits means that these vendors are often treated as illegal entities, despite their importance to the city's economy.

Complex Licensing Process: The process of obtaining a vending license is often complicated, time-consuming, and costly. As a result, many vendors are unable to navigate the bureaucratic hurdles and are forced to operate without legal permits.

Lack of Social Security: Most street vendors do not have access to social security benefits, leaving them vulnerable to poverty, illness, and economic shocks. The absence of social protection means that street vendors are often left to fend for themselves in times of crisis.

Low and Unstable Income: Street vendors often earn low and irregular incomes, making it difficult for them to sustain their livelihoods. The competition among vendors is intense, and profit margins are slim, leading to economic insecurity.

Competition and Market Saturation: The increasing number of street vendors in Kolkata has led to market saturation, resulting in fierce competition for customers. This has further reduced profit margins and made it challenging for vendors to maintain a stable income.

Inadequate Infrastructure: The lack of proper infrastructure, such as designated vending zones, storage facilities, and sanitation, hampers the operations of street vendors. The absence of basic amenities like water, electricity, and waste disposal makes it difficult for vendors to conduct their businesses effectively.

Urban Development Policies: Urban planning and development policies in Kolkata often prioritize the needs of formal businesses and real estate over those of street vendors. This has led to the displacement of vendors from their traditional locations, making it difficult for them to find alternative spaces to operate(Kamalipour, 2022).

The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014:

In response to the challenges faced by street vendors, the Indian government introduced the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014. The Act was designed to protect the rights of street vendors and to regulate street vending activities across the country. Some of the key provisions of the Act include:

Legal Recognition: The Act provides legal recognition to street vendors and aims to protect them from harassment by authorities. It mandates the formation of Town Vending Committees (TVCs) to oversee the implementation of the Act and to ensure that vendors are treated fairly.

Vending Zones: The Act requires local authorities to designate specific areas as vending zones, where vendors can operate without fear of eviction. These zones are intended to provide a safe and secure environment for vendors to conduct their businesses.

Licensing and Regulation: The Act outlines a simplified process for obtaining vending licenses, with the aim of reducing bureaucratic hurdles and making it easier for vendors to operate legally. It also sets guidelines for the regulation of street vending activities, including the allocation of vending spaces and the management of vending zones.

Despite the positive intentions of the Act, its implementation in Kolkata has been inconsistent. Many street vendors remain unaware of their rights under the Act, and the formation of TVCs has been slow and uneven across the city. Additionally, the process of designating vending zones has been fraught with challenges, leading to continued conflicts between vendors and authorities(Sarabhai et al., 2016).

Government Initiatives and Policy Responses:

The government of West Bengal and the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) have taken several initiatives to address the issues faced by street vendors. These include:

Town Vending Committees (TVCs): The formation of TVCs is a key requirement under the Street Vendors Act. These committees are responsible for identifying vending zones, issuing licenses, and addressing grievances. However, the effectiveness of TVCs in Kolkata has been limited due to delays in their formation and lack of proper coordination among stakeholders.

Designated Vending Zones: The KMC has attempted to create designated vending zones in various parts of the city. These zones are intended to provide a secure environment for vendors to operate, free from the threat of eviction. However, the implementation of these zones has been uneven, and many vendors continue to operate in unauthorized areas.

Awareness Programs: The government has conducted awareness programs to educate street vendors about their rights and the provisions of the Street Vendors Act. These programs aim to empower vendors to assert their rights and to reduce the instances of harassment by authorities(Bapat, 2022).

Despite these efforts, the overall impact of government initiatives has been limited. The challenges faced by street vendors in Kolkata remain significant, and there is a need for more comprehensive and coordinated policy responses.

2. Conceptualizing Social Security

Social security, traditionally associated with formal employment sectors, refers to a range of measures designed to protect individuals from economic and social risks. For street vendors in Kolkata, a city renowned for its bustling street markets and informal economy, social security is a critical yet often overlooked issue. These vendors contribute significantly to the local economy and provide essential goods and services to the urban population. However, they face numerous challenges that threaten their livelihood and well-being, highlighting the need for a tailored approach to social security in this sector.

Defining Social Security for Street Vendors:

Social security for street vendors encompasses various components designed to address their unique vulnerabilities. Unlike formal workers who typically have access to benefits such as health insurance, pensions, and unemployment benefits, street vendors operate within the informal economy where such protections are scarce. Therefore, conceptualizing social security for street vendors involves identifying and implementing measures that safeguard their economic stability and social welfare.

Economic Vulnerabilities

Street vendors in Kolkata often operate without formal contracts or job security, making them susceptible to economic fluctuations and policy changes. Their earnings are irregular, and they frequently face challenges such as fluctuating demand, competition, and price instability. To mitigate these risks, social security measures could include access to microcredit, savings programs, and financial literacy training. These initiatives would enable vendors to manage income variability and plan for future uncertainties.

Health and Safety Protections

Health and safety concerns are paramount for street vendors, who work in often hazardous conditions without adequate protective measures. The lack of access to affordable healthcare exacerbates their vulnerability, particularly in times of illness or injury. A comprehensive social security framework for street vendors should include provisions for health insurance, occupational health and safety regulations, and access to basic medical services. This would help

ensure that vendors can maintain their health and continue their livelihood without the fear of financial ruin due to medical emergencies(Rao et al., 2023).

Legal and Social Recognition

Street vendors in Kolkata frequently operate without official recognition or legal status, which affects their access to public services and protections. Social security for these vendors necessitates legal recognition and support from government agencies. This includes the implementation of regulatory frameworks that safeguard their rights, provide avenues for grievance redressal, and ensure fair treatment. Furthermore, integrating vendors into urban planning processes and providing designated vending zones could enhance their visibility and legitimacy.

Social Inclusion and Support

Beyond economic and health-related protections, social security for street vendors also involves social inclusion and community support. Vendors often face social stigma and marginalization, which can impact their mental well-being and social cohesion. Social security measures should thus include initiatives aimed at promoting social integration, such as community programs, skill development workshops, and social support networks. These efforts would help vendors build a sense of community, gain new skills, and improve their overall quality of life. Conceptualizing social security for street vendors in Kolkata requires a multifaceted approach that addresses their unique economic, health, legal, and social needs. By implementing targeted measures that provide financial stability, health protections, legal recognition, and social support, policymakers can enhance the well-being of street vendors and ensure their continued contribution to the city's economy. As Kolkata continues to evolve, it is essential to recognize and support the integral role of street vendors, fostering a more inclusive and secure environment for all (Mukherjee & Mitra, 2022).

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a Doctrinal and Empirical research design to gain a comprehensive understanding of the crisis faced by street vendors in Kolkata.

The selection of these specific areas in Kolkata for studying street vendors is based on their distinctive characteristics and significance within the urban landscape. The research focuses on various key areas in Kolkata known for their vibrant street vending activities.

Research Design:

The research design is exploratory and descriptive, aiming to analyze the impact of social security laws on streetvendors in India.

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data collection andanalysis.

Sampling:

Purposive sampling is used to select a diverse sample of street vendors from different regions, cities, and typesof vending activities. The sample size (total 60) is determined based on the research objectives, feasibility, and representativeness.

4. Result and Discussions

Problems Faced by Street Vendors in Kolkata City

Table: No.1. Lack of Storage Facilities among the Respondents.

S. No	Variables	Respondents	Percentage
1	At Home	28	46.67
2	At Rented House	17	28.33
3	At Vending Place	03	05
4	At Cold Store	02	3.33
5	Any other	10	16.67
6	Total	60	100%

Source: Field Survey

The above table shows the status of the storage facilities among the respondents. The majority of the respondentsdo not have the storage facility to store the unsold stock and due to which many a times the products gets wasted.About 46.67% respondents store unsold stock at their own house where they live, 28.33% of the respondents hiredseparate house to store the unsold stock. Whereas, 05 % respondents store at the vending place and only 3.33% respondents are having the cold storage facility. (Majumdar, 2020). Further 16.67% respondents store either at neighbor's place or at their relative's house etc. Street vendors' especially selling fruits and vegetables face lot ofproblems to store the residuals. Thus, the lack of storage

facility for the street vendors affects their income levelbecause many a time vegetables and fruits go bad and they suffer losses especially during summers. Further, thosewho pay rent to store the inventory stock do not have the cold storage facility. They are provided only the space to store without the proper storage facilities.

Table: No.2. Obstacles for the Street Vendors in Kolkata City

S. No.	Variables	Respondents	Percentages
1.	**Lack of Basic Facilities**		
	No Problem	03	05
	Lack of Sanitary facilities	19	31.67
	Lack water facility	16	26.67
	Lack of Power facility	17	28.33
	Any Other	05	8.33
	Total	60	100%
2	**Social Security Problems**		
	No Problem	05	8.33
	Harassment by authorities'	10	16.66
	Problem of theft	04	6.67
	Harassment by Police	16	26.67
	Bribe to Police	07	11.67
	lack of business freedom	18	30
	Total	60	100%
3	**Financial and Economic Problems**		
	No Problem	09	15
	shortage of working capital	15	25
	lack of credit	13	21.67
	Non- profitability of business	23	38.33
	Total	60	100%

Source: Field Survey

The above table shows the different types of obstacles faced by the street vendors in the city. The panel 1 shows the lack of basic facilities at the vending place. About 31.67% respondents face the lack of sanitary facilities nearby the vending place. Due to the lack of toilet

facilities, especially the female vendors face lot of trouble.

Also, the authorities and the local people stop the vendors to defecate in the open. If the toilet facility is there thenit will not happen and the surrounding area will remain neat and clean. Further, 26.67% respondents face the lack of water facility. Also, 28.33% respondents face the problem of electricity facility which is very helpful especiallyfor the juice sellers and also for the other sellers during the summers. Whereas 05% respondent says that they do not face any such problem. The panel 2 of shows the social security problem faced by the respondents. 26.67% respondents mentioned that they face harassment by the police and 11.67% says they bribe the police whenever they harass them. Also, 16.67% respondents face harassment by the local authorities such as municipal committeesand others. About 30% respondent says that there is lack of business freedom and 6.67% respondents face the problem of theft. The very few respondents are of the opinion that they do not face such problems while operatingtheir business. The panel 3 shows the status of financial and economic problems among the respondents. The majority of the respondent says non-profitability of the business is the main problem. About 25% respondents face shortage of working capital, 21.67% face the lack of credit and 15% respondent says that they do not face any financial problem.

The above figure shows the opinions of the street vendors regarding their expectations from the customers. Majority of the respondents (81.67%) want the customers to come again and again, 8.33% respondents mentionedthat the customers should respect them, whereas only 5% respondents expect bigger purchase. They mentioned that bigger purchase would not get more profit to them, that is why most of the vendors do not want to sell bigger quantity.

5. Conclusion

Street vendors in Kolkata play an indispensable role in the urban informal economy, offering essential, affordable goods and services to the city's low-income population while generating widespread self-employment. However, this paper demonstrates that they remain heavily marginalized and vulnerable to multi-dimensional challenges:

- Infrastructural Deficits: A significant majority of vendors lack basic infrastructure; 46.67% must transport unsold inventory back to their homes, and 28.33% rent external storage without refrigeration, leading to frequent product spoilage and loss of income—particularly for fruit and vegetable sellers. Furthermore, a lack of basic facilities at vending locations, such as sanitation (31.67%), electricity (28.33%), and clean water (26.67%), severely hampers daily operations and disproportionately affects female vendors.
- Social and Legal Insecurity: Despite legislative protections under the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, implementation by

the local government and Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) remains slow and uneven. Consequently, vendors frequently experience lack of business freedom (30%), harassment by police (26.67%) and local authorities (16.67%), and are often subjected to extortion/bribes (11.67%).

- Economic Fragility: Vendors face severe financial risks, predominantly driven by non-profitability (38.33%), a shortage of working capital (25%), and a lack of access to formal credit (21.67%).

Policy Recommendations & Way Forward

To bridge the gap between existing policy mandates and on-the-ground reality, a multi-faceted approach to social security is essential:

1. Effective Implementation of the 2014 Act: Accelerate the formation and active functioning of Town Vending Committees (TVCs) to properly streamline licensing, protect vendors from harassment, and establish official vending zones.
2. Targeted Infrastructure Support: Municipal authorities should provide designated, hygienic vending spaces equipped with basic facilities—such as public toilets, access to clean water, electricity, and shared cold storage options to reduce perishable waste.
3. Comprehensive Social Security Framework: Expand social protection to include tailored financial products (e.g., microcredit, savings plans), direct health insurance coverage, and occupational safety regulations to safeguard vendors against sudden economic or medical crises.

Ultimately, integrating street vendors into formal urban planning and social security networks is vital not only to protect their human rights and livelihoods, but also to build a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable economy for Kolkata.

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