

**Book Review**

## **Of Urban Street Vendors and their Struggles**

**Babu P Remesh\***

*Informal Markets, Livelihood and Politics: Street Vendors in Urban India (2017), Debdulal Saha, Routledge, Abington and New York; pp: XX + 217; Price: Rs. 795/*

As rightly pointed out by (Late) Prof. Sharit Bhowmik in his Foreword, the book under review is one of the first comprehensive research studies on street vending in India. It provides a holistic understanding of all major aspects concerning urban street vending, including market structures, profile of workers, livelihood struggles, governance, and policy issues. The discussions and analyses in this book are presented in the broader context of informal economy and, thus, it also provides insightful discussions and raises important theoretical questions on informal labour markets.

Apart from the introduction, the contents in the book are schemed into six chapters. At the outset, the broader context of burgeoning informalisation in India is discussed, highlighting the increased prominence of self-employment. It is shown that, over time, given the dwindling employment opportunities in farm; non-farm and formal segments of the economy, street vending has become a major self-employment option for a growing majority of urban poor. Subsequently, a detailed conceptualisation of informal economy is attempted. Various dimensions of the informal sector (such as economic, social, gender, legal, institutional and cultural) are explained in the introductory section, besides detailing out the types and composition of informal workers. Based on available secondary data, especially the latest rounds of NSSO, the section also offers a brief account on the informal workers in India. Eventually, the discussion moves to the central-theme of urban street vending, stating major concerns addressed in the study. All these provide an adequate preamble and contextualisation to the empirical research reported in this volume.

The current scenario of street vending in India is elaborated in detail, in the first four chapters of this book, based on a rich body of primary data gathered from 10 urban centres, covering a total of 2000 street vendors. Chapter 1 begins with discussing the profile of street vendors addressing the central questions such as ‘who are they?’ ‘where do they come from?’ and ‘what are their socio-economic and demographic backgrounds?’. Accordingly, it provides disaggregate analyses on a range of aspects

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concerning the respondents of the study, including: gender composition, religion, social-group, marital status, age, migration particulars, income details, literacy levels and household information. Essentially, it is established that the socio-demographic profile of the workers is very crucial in determining the type and nature of street vending urban centres.

Chapter 2 discusses various categories of urban street vending and explains the structures and characteristics of the occupation. The chapter also highlights the determinants that facilitate and sustain urban street vending as a livelihood option. It is shown that a plethora of 'push' and 'pull' factors influence the choice of urban street vending as a livelihood strategy, where social contacts and social networking assume crucial roles. The chapter also explains about a range of other aspects such as upward mobility in the occupation, backward and forward linkages, sources of credit and so on. A brief discussion of customer views on street vending is also included in this chapter. The descriptions in the chapter are supplemented with short notes on all the 10 urban markets and brief case studies, explaining various aspects of the street vending such as conditions of work, survival strategies, informal systems of credit and trust-based relationships at the workplace. The thick analyses provided help the reader to understand the hard realities and complexities of street vending and the multiple layers of insecurities experienced by the urban street vendors. It is shown that the occupation is much more than a mere source of income to the vendors, as it considerably alters their positions, spaces and relative power relations within the society.

Chapter 3 delves more deeply into the issues and anxieties of vendors apropos occupying public space as their workplace. 'How the use of public space for vending purposes affects the dignity of workers?' is a central question addressed here. With the aid of rich empirical evidences, it is shown that street vendors are continuously under the threat of eviction. Given this situation, they become victims of a nexus of bribe collectors rent, seekers and extorters including municipal authorities, police and some 'influential vendors'.

Livelihood insecurities, uncertainties and vulnerabilities experienced by the vendors are explained in Chapter 4. It is shown that a multitude of factors including competition at the marketplace, prolonged working hours and borrowings from money lenders with high rate of interests intensify the daily-struggles of the vendors. The chapter also illuminates the crucial role of social relations and mutual support systems, which often help the vendors to cop up with adverse situations. Given the poor quality of governance structures, street vending is mostly operated through illegal arrangements, where payment of bribes to local authorities and police becomes a survival strategy. Based on the primary data, it is reported that, nearly 5-10 per cent of total income of the vendors is extorted through rent seeking.

Chapter 5 is exclusively on trade unions and collective bargaining. Detailed discussions on grass root organisations such as SEWA, NASVI and Nidan make the chapter very informative. The analyses here provide deep insights into the question of freedom of

association of street vendors, underlining the constraints as well as facilitating factors in the organising path for street vendors. The last chapter's focus is on legislating street vending. Accordingly, it begins with a discussion on legal recognition and regulation of street vending, duly linking it to various milestones in the policy-front such as National Policy on Urban Street Vendors in 2004 and Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014. The contested nature of the issue of legalising street vending is clearly explained in the discussion. On the one hand, it is argued that legal recognition will reduce the insecurities and harassment faced by the street-vendors. At the same time, it is also viewed that it will further ruin the trade by bringing in more rigidity, rent-seeking and malpractices. The latter part of the chapter offers a brief assessment of urban street vending in India from the perspective of 'decent work' framework of ILO. Accordingly, the chapter keeps a balance between national and international policy frameworks while conceptualising legality and dignity of work of urban street vendors.

On the whole, the book offers a very rich reading-experience on urban street vendors, as it touches upon all the major dimensions of the occupation, including living and working conditions, governance structures, politics of survival, issues of regulation, livelihood strategies, questions of collectivisation and policy aspects. It testifies the researcher's hard work, for a fairly long period. The approach followed by the researcher is truly interdisciplinary and the analyses in the volume exhibit commendable skills in combining both secondary as well as primary data and in blending both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

While appreciating the utility and relevance of the volume, it is also important to highlight certain deficiencies, noticed during the review. It is felt that the book would have contained some details on the sampling procedure. The readers would certainly like to be informed as to how the 10 urban centres are identified and the sample sizes of 200 workers are arrived at in each of the study areas.

Notwithstanding the above mentioned issue, there is no doubt that the book is a welcome addition to the extant literature on informal sector and urban street vending in India. The book is of extreme relevance to the researchers and students in Development Studies, Urban Sociology, Public Policy, Informal Sector and Labour Studies. It is also equally useful for policy planners and law makers, as it provides empirically-embedded analyses on crucial issues concerning regulation/legalisation of street vending and on protection of livelihoods of street vendors.