

Grassroots Organization and Informal Economy: Learnings from Hawker Sangram Committee

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Abstract:

The informal sector, characterized by unregulated economic activities, dominates the contemporary global economy and supports about 80% of all employed individuals in India. Grassroots Organizations (GROs) play a crucial role in legitimizing and supporting the informal sector, particularly when formal means are unavailable. The GRO, Hawker Sangram Committee (HSC) in Kolkata, India, has united hawkers' unions across the city, state, and country, formed the National Hawker Federation, and passed the 2014 Street Vendors Act, legalizing street hawking and vending in the country. This study presents the roles and practices of such GROs in legitimizing informal workers through interviews with HSC members and union leaders, focus group discussions with street hawkers, and photo documentation. As the informal sector is expected to grow with global urbanization, recognizing GROs' roles in supporting marginalized individuals can provide useful policy insights to governments, practitioners, and scholars across nations.

Keywords: Hawker Sangram Committee, Informal Economy, Grassroots Organization, Global South, Kolkata, India

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1. Introduction

1.1. Street Vending: A Quintessential Form of Informal Economy

The informal economy, more popularly known as the informal sector (Bhowmik, 2010), comprises a wide range of unregulated economic activities and provides jobs for almost two billion (61%) of the world's workers today (ILO, 2019). The informal sector refers to unincorporated enterprises not affiliated with government authorities or managed by legal entities but owned by individuals (ILO, 2019). In informal employment, workers are typically self-employed individuals, unpaid family workers, and wage workers with no written contract, social insurance, or protection (World Bank, 2015). The absence of strict adherence to national legislation, income taxation, social security, and employment benefits makes this economy prone to injustice, violation of human rights, and straying away from labor moralities.

In India, almost two-thirds of the workers are in the informal sector; 88.2% of such workers reside below the poverty level, and 79% live in cities (ILO, 2019). While the informal sector dominates the world's employment and the nature of urbanization, it also creates challenges to comprehend and control informality, especially in developing countries. As these nations continue to urbanize, informal economies like street vending¹, also often referred to as hawking, question their legitimacy and future sustainability. Due to a dearth of initiatives by formal regimes, informal grassroots organizations (GROs) have taken the lead in formalizing the informal. This paper investigates the roles of GROs in the informal economy by scrutinizing the actions of the Hawker Sangram Committee (HSC) in legalizing street vending and hawking in India. The goal is to understand when, why, and how GROs like HSC operates and facilitate grassroots actions. The paper argues that GROs, like HSC, play crucial roles in both the macro- and micro-levels of government structures and civic bodies, blurring the conventional boundaries of formal and informal.

¹ The 2014 Street Vendors Act of India defines street vendor as “a person engaged in vending of articles, goods, wares, food items or merchandise of everyday use or offering services to the general public, in a street, lane, sidewalk, footpath, pavement, public park or any other public place or private area, from a temporary built up structure or by moving from place to place and includes hawker, peddler, squatter and all other synonymous terms which may be local or region specific.”

Street vending is one of India's most popular forms of informal self-employment, especially in urban areas (Bose and Mishra, 2013). It is a crucial source of income for many as the organized sector cannot employ all of the working population, leaving a significant part still reliant on the unorganized sector (Banerjee and Ghosh, 2019). Many street vendors are migrant workers who immigrate from neighboring countries like Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh or rural areas of the country, owing to the poor economic conditions of their native places. Most of these migrants are unskilled, have low literacy, and struggle to secure jobs in the formal economy (Anjaria, 2006). Some may have had work experience in the formal sector, such as factories, but had turned to street vending due to the decline of industries in India (Bhowmik, 2005). Despite the low income and uncertainty, street vending is a viable option as it requires low investment and a bare minimum skillset (Morales, 2000; Bhowmik, 2007; 2010; Tucker & Devlin, 2019). In India, it is estimated that street vendors share 2.5% of the urban population, but the actual number exceeds 10 million (Bose and Mishra, 2013). The average daily income of a street vendor is estimated at 65 rupees. Street vendors can earn up to 150 rupees, which is higher than the income of daily wage laborers (Anjaria, 2006; Shah, Joshi, & Gopinathan, 2023). Street vending generates hundreds of thousands of jobs in major metro areas, wherein each area, street vendors and hawkers contribute approximately 12,000 million rupees annual turnover (Bose and Mishra, 2013, pg. 167). However, in most cases, these incomes go undocumented and untaxed due to a lack of government initiatives to manage street vending.

The growing number of street vendors poses a challenge to urban development, especially in urban governance (Rafieian & Kianfar, 2023). Street vending creates spatial conflicts over the use of sidewalks and other vital public spaces in the dense cities of India. The Indian government has only been recently active in addressing the issue. However, the laws passed by the state and local governments have mostly been against the welfare of these vendors and hawkers. Moreover, due to the lack of government interventions, mobile and stationary vendors and hawkers have used unregulated make-shift stalls, thus creating visual pollution and leading to the common notion of being eyesores to the middle and upper classes in the city. Street vendors mostly support the urban poor by providing food, clothing, utensils, and other necessities at affordable prices. They also provide the middle classes with the convenience of shopping at the door front. However, the constant struggle of a city to maintain its "image" as a brand in the milieu of globalization and development has rendered informality undesirable (Kamalipour and Dovey, 2019). The undesirability of the street vendors by the upper cohorts and the government has led to attempts to evict them from the country's urban landscape, also known as spatial purification movements. As a reaction to these movements, the formalization of informal vendors began at the grassroots level with the formation of the HSC, a GRO in Kolkata. Their relentless efforts to legitimize street vending and hawking in India brought about the passing of the 2014 Street Vendors Act, which legalized street vending in the country.

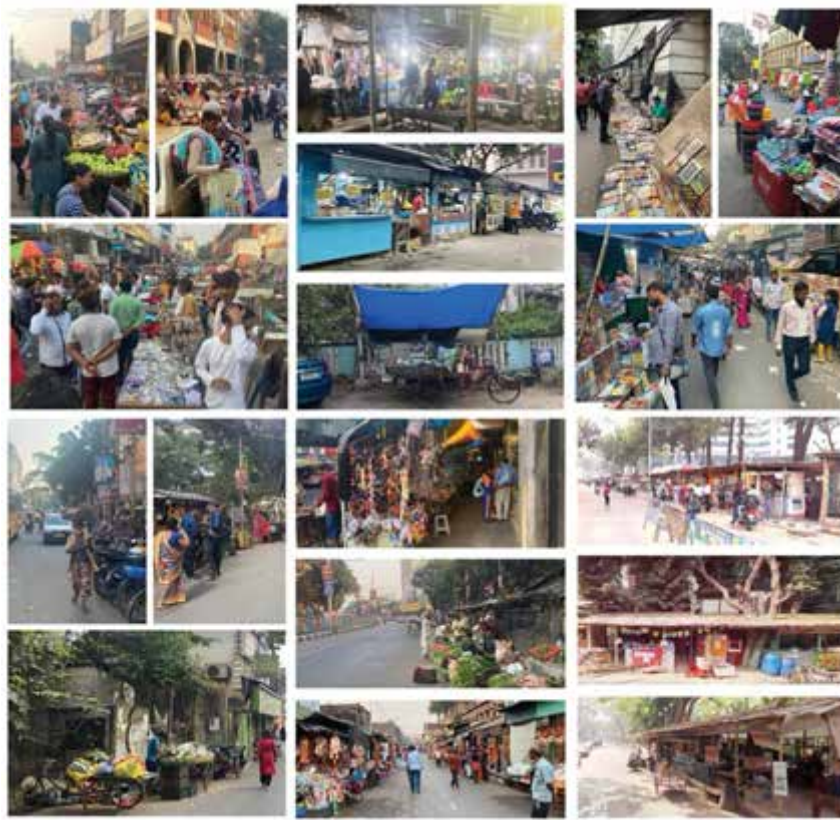


Figure 1: Street Vendors and Hawkers in Kolkata

1.2. Kolkata and its Street Hawkers:

Kolkata is the capital of the state of West Bengal and was founded in 1686 with the conglomeration of three villages – Sutanuti, Govindopur, and Kalikata, by the East India Company as the colonial capital for the expansion of the British Raj. Today, the city houses a population of around 4.5 million, and the Kolkata Metropolitan Area has a population of around 14 million (Census 2011). The city has a population growth rate of 4%, owing to the migrants from neighboring states and countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan. Almost 23% of the city's population resides in informal settlements, such as slums, 19% of the population is below the poverty level, and more than 20% are unemployed. Of the total workers in the city, around 52% are migrant workers. Almost 65% of such migrant workers stay in the city for more than ten years, residing in slums or other informal settlements and earning livelihood through informal commercial activities, like street vending. In India, approximately 2.5% of the urban population is engaged in street hawking and vending, contributing to around 10 million street hawkers and vendors. Being India's third largest metropolitan city post-independence, especially following the huge migration from Bangladesh in the 1970s, Kolkata observed an influx of street vendors who opted for this mode of income as their only way of survival. Today, the streets of Kolkata are filled with hawkers and vendors who occupy portions of the sidewalks and vehicular roads to sell a wide range of fresh and prepared food items, stationeries, clothes, shoes, books, furniture, and whatnot. Most vendors sell from temporary stalls, shades, or even mobile carts. Their vending areas are typically fixed, except for mobile hawkers who roam around different parts of the city. A recent survey conducted by the Kolkata Metropolitan Corporation (KMC) identified 59,085 street hawkers in various hawking zones of all 144 wards of the city (Kolkata Municipal Corporation, 2024). However, these numbers only represent the "genuine" hawkers who have a valid vending license with the KMC and do not account for "ghost" ones who sell illegally (Ray, 2024). Regardless of their genuineness, hawkers pay around Rs. 265 crore (31.6 million USD) a year, almost 3% of their annual turnover, as bribes to various agencies, signifying a lack of management

and the prevalence of corruption in the hawking business in Kolkata (Ganguly, 2006). Figure 1 shows a variety of street vendors and hawkers in Kolkata and their vending styles.

1.3. Spatial Purification Movements:

In the mid-1990s, major metropolitan cities in India witnessed “spatial purification” movements to eliminate street dwellers, vendors, and hawkers – mostly immigrants from rural areas and neighboring countries (Sibley, 1995). These movements were led by the city governments orchestrating brutal approaches of excluding unwanted cohorts of society from its public spaces. Several such instances include “Operation Pushback” in New Delhi in the 1990s, designed to force illegal immigrants from Bangladesh out of the city who were mostly residing as slum dwellers (Ramachandran, 2002). Around the same time, in Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay), various neighborhoods undertook grassroots social and spatial purification movements by deploying cleanup projects to purge the poor and homeless out of their neighborhoods. Most of these initiatives were patronized by the local governments and law enforcement. For example, “the former Sheriff of Bombay had a vision of tree-lined boulevards, fountains, and playgrounds. There will be no slums. The streets will be clean, with wide pavements unencumbered by hawkers. People will stroll through pedestrian plazas. The night will be brilliant with majestic buildings and fountains” (Seabrook, 1996, pg. 48). The Brihanmumbai (Greater Mumbai) Municipal Corporation (BMC) employed several regimes to prohibit vending and begging on the beaches and gardens of the posh areas of the city, limiting the use of quality public spaces by the urban elites (Fernandes, 2004). This instigated the relocation of the hawkers and beggars to other parts of the city, creating further revolts among several middle-class residents and citizens’ organizations challenging the BMC’s legal zoning plans to prevent these relocations to their neighborhoods (Devidayal, 1998). Civic organizations, such as the Citizens for the Protection of Public Space, are examples of the rising conflicts between the bourgeoisie and the proletarians in many cities of India attempting to keep the ‘ugly’ occupants off ‘their beautiful urban spaces.’ Kolkata experienced similar forms of spatial purification movements in the 1970s and 1990s. In 1975, Kolkata saw an extreme rise in street hawkers due to the influx of immigrants from rural parts of West Bengal and neighboring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan. The congestion and inconvenience caused by these informal workers to the public life of the streets motivated the city government to undertake active eviction actions. “Operation Hawkers” in 1977 and “Operation Sunshine Drive” in 1996 were two mass-scale eviction projects executed in Kolkata. “Operation Sunshine Drive” recruited around 10,000 policemen who forcefully demolished around 7,000 street vending stalls from major informal commercial corridors of the city (Dell and Ghose, 2009).

1.4. The Hawker Sangram Committee in Kolkata:

HSC was founded in August 1996 as a reactionary measure to the spatial purification actions witnessed in Kolkata. The organization became renowned and most vocal after Operation Sunshine (OS) Drive on November 24th, 1996, led by the Kolkata Metropolitan Corporation (KMC) and the Kolkata Police. The committee was formed by a coalition of 36 street hawkers’ unions. Before OS, a smaller committee of four unions was in place in reaction to the 1981 Sealdah Flyover hawkers’ eviction project, the first documented case of eviction and political protest. HSC works towards the welfare of street hawkers and protects the “pavement economy” and human rights from the pressures of global growth and development (HSC Constitution, 2022). HSC acts as a ‘collective resistance’ against the eviction of street hawkers post-OS (Bandhopadhyay, 2016). The committee’s mission is to unionize, organize, and unite street hawkers and existing hawker unions to protect and legitimize street hawking in West Bengal and India. They can be conceptualized as an umbrella organization of the hawker unions and categorized as “a voluntary, non-sectarian, non-profit making organization” (HSC Constitution, 2022). HSC also facilitated the formation of the National Hawkers Federation (NHF) in May 2001 – an association of Street Vendors across 28 States, with 1,188 Unions, including 11 Central Trade Unions and over 20 International Trade unions abroad. The committee operates under the leadership of Saktiman Ghosh, the HSC and NHF general secretary, and manages 132 hawker unions of KMC and neighboring Bidhannagar and New Town areas. The current members are a group of leaders of the unions affiliated with HSC. The HSC members represent unions registered under the United Trade Union Congress, the Indian Federation of Trade Unions, the All India Central Council of Trade Unions, the All India Trade Union Congress, the Indian National Trade Union Council, the Trade Union Coordination Committee, unions with the Socialist Unity Centre of India, and few other unregistered unions (Lahiri, 2022).

The main source of funding for HSC is from membership fees and donations. The organization collects around 50,000 INR (around 600 USD) annually through member union subscriptions and donations. These funds are used for expenses incurred towards prints and stationery items, meetings, travel, festivities, office electricity charges, rallies and processions, audits and renewals, newspapers and magazines, social welfare programs, disaster reliefs, and other miscellaneous expenditures. The list below shows the operations HSC run on a regular basis:

- issuance of identity cards to new hawkers; creating new unions based on need and interest
- monitoring affiliation and legitimacy of existing member unions
- organizing monthly meetings with member unions to address concerns and issues
- communicating with KMC's Mayor in Council of Hawkers Rehabilitation Plans, State Government, Central Government, and other government bodies for policy implementation and validation
- organizing annual rallies and processions, such as the International Hawkers' Day on May 26 and Operation Sunshine Day on November 24
- facilitating protests against pressing government policies and actions against hawkers' welfare
- representing and communicating hawkers rights to local, state, regional, national, and international conferences
- connecting national and international stakeholders, such as United Nation bodies and Ministries of Development and Poverty Alleviation in India and in Southeast Asia
- engaging in intellectual and scholarly discussions through workshops and seminars
- developing policies, design guidelines, and acts for hawkers' welfare
- organizing periodic workshops to train and educate hawkers on hawking rules and practices
- staying vigilant about illegal hawking in HSC affiliate member union areas and in the city in general

1.5. What roles does GRO play in the Informal Economy?

A few studies, like Lahiri, 2022; Bandyopadhyay, 2009, 2011, 2014, and 2016, have researched HSC's actions in passing the 2014 Street Vendors Act, but their role as a GRO is yet to be analyzed. This study aims to understand how GROs work and their roles in legitimizing the informal when formal means are unavailable by analyzing the case of HSC. While it is widely accepted that GROs play crucial roles in solving local-level issues (Uphoff, 1993; Brown & Ashman, 1996; Ostrom, 2004; Hilmi, 2012; Recio, 2015), their approach to solving such issues is not scrutinized enough, especially from the perspective of their contribution to the informal economy. GROs like HSC have often been observed to organize themselves in a scenario that emerges as an immediate response to the cause, in this case, to stop the evictions of the hawkers. However, very little is known about how they organize themselves without any training or assistance from a formal organization. This research attempts to investigate such modes of operation by understanding HSC's roles in formalizing and managing the informal street hawkers and vendors. The study emphasizes the importance of GROs in the sustainability of informal street hawkers and vendors in India (and the Global South). The study also highlights possible coalitions between GROs and formal organizations, such as city corporations and planning departments, that can foster better ways to manage urban informality.

2. GROs and Informal Economy:

2.1. Defining GROs:

Organizations are typically associated with the sector of society they belong to or represent. For example, public agencies represent the state sector and corporations belong to the market sector (Brown & Ashman, 1996). In such categorization, GROs are considered the basic local building blocks of society and are typically recognized as organizations serving at the local, communal, and group levels of decision-making and activity for development (Uphoff, 1993). Although there are many ways to understand grassroots, most scholars consider them as local organizations that are comprised of and benefit local people (Uphoff, 1993; Brown & Ashman, 1996; Ostrom, 2004; Hilmi, 2012; Recio, 2015). They are clearly distinguished from national or regional organizations that remain distant from the local community for whom they work and provide benefits. GROs are also considered different

from Non-Governmental Organizations or NGOs. NGOs represent the civil society sector but may or may not comprise or work for the grassroots (Brown & Ashman, 1996). Grassroots are characterized by the purpose they serve in society. For example, in defining grassroots innovation, Hilmi considers that GROs are formed “at the bottom of the pyramid, usually due to necessity, hardship, and challenges” (Hilmi, 2012, p.g. 2). GROs solve local problems often overlooked or ignored by formal organizations or due to the absence of relevant formal institutions (Bhaduri and Kumar, 2011). GROs can also be defined as the byproducts of collective actions exercising human agency that requires more than one individual to contribute to an effort to achieve a certain outcome (Ostrom, 2004; Recio, 2015). GROs are associated with the “ungovernable” cohorts of the population (Recio 2015) and are referred to as the fringe stakeholders of urban development and processes (Chowdhury, Kourula, & Siltaoja, 2018). With these notions, HSC qualifies as a GRO created at the grassroots level by informal street hawkers and vendors to prevent their eviction representing the grassroots agency.

2.2. Urban Informality:

Urban informality is an idiom of urbanization and a logic through which differential spatial value is produced and managed (Roy and AlSayyad, 2004). Informality is “a sphere of unregulated activities that exist outside the formal order of urbanization” (Roy, 2010, pg. 98). It is a “mode of production of space, expression of class power and have the ability to command infrastructure, services, and legitimacy” (Roy, 2011, pg. 233). In planning terms, informality represents “a state of deregulation” (Roy, 2009, pg. 80), as public land management, use, and ownership cannot be controlled by established or “formal” laws and regulations and exists due to open and multiple interpretations of laws and regulations in the Global South (Berry, 1993; Holston, 2008). Urban informality exists due to inadequate formal infrastructure, but the complexity of urbanism in Indian societies and the Global South lies in the diffused boundaries between formal and informal. As Mehta (2019, pg. 239) points out, “by viewing informality as the ‘other’ and through the lens of the formal, we cannot fathom and appreciate these processes and the benefits they entail.” Therefore, urban informality can be understood as the coexistence of the formal and the informal in terms of activities, legitimacy, regulation, institutionalization, and production/ reproduction of space and interaction between the formal and the informal by means of everyday resistance, survival strategy, conflict and resolution, and expression of class power (Mahato, 2020). In the societies of the Global South, including India, urban informality contributes in two ways. Firstly, increasing differences between the two extremes of society give rise to structural adjustments favoring the elites and middle classes – forcing the marginalized population to seek refuge in informal means of living and occupation. Informality as a process of providing shelter to the undesirables of society is preferred because of its nature of negotiation between legality and illegality, legitimacy and illegitimacy, and authorized and unauthorized, and acts as a “logic of resource allocation, accumulation, and authority” (Roy, 2009, pg. 83). Secondly, informal institutions and relations provide power and existential purpose to the grassroots – an alternative means of solving urban issues. Informality challenges the conventional socio-spatial structure of developing societies and is increasingly being institutionalized out of necessity.

2.3. Role of GROs in Urban Informality:

GROs are increasingly being associated with the informal sector, especially in establishing agencies for the informal population (Lindell, 2010; JumaAgaya, Ungaya, & Okuto, 2021). In recent years, we have seen the “institutionalizing informality” in India and other countries of the Global South through the standardization of labor relations and commodity chains within the informal economy and affiliation of informality through unionization (Ustyuzhantseva, 2015; Bandyopadhyay, 2016; Schoenecker, 2023). GROs play important roles in such institutionalization. With the absence of formal means of managing and controlling informal activities and population, urban informality has sought refuge to self-help through grassroots in many instances. It is widely assumed that informality exists because the poor are politically passive groups – therefore, marginalized or informalized (Bayat, 2000). However, the notion of the passive poor is being challenged to become increasingly active and powerful. They are becoming mainstream, giving rise to a new social class – the “precariat” who, as informal and marginalized populations, continuously reclaim their place in society through grassroots initiatives (Schierup et al. 2015). Informality is the survival strategy where marginalized groups opt for informal ways to counter unemployment or inflation and demonstrate everyday resistance or micropolitics through protests among subaltern groups due

to the dearth of collective action (Bayat, 2000; Butcher, 2021). Organized political practices are often seen to herd and feed such survival politics of the poor (Chatterjee, 2004). GROs contribute not only to the survival strategies of the poor but are also an involuntary part of the formal political structure and advocates of the marginalized (Mitlin, 2001; Roy, 2009). Castells (1983) defines these forms of grassroots insurgency as “urban populism,” which occurs in day-to-day activities. GROs instigate the urban territorial movement by supporting urban informality’s claim over urban space (Chatterjee, 2004) and advocate to mark informality not to be marginalized but integrated into the urban society (Bayat, 2000). The spatial purification movements are such urban territorial movements and their counter-movements by the informal sectors that showcase the advancement of the informal into formalized society through grassroots. A grassroots social movement is a group-level phenomenon initiated and maintained by an umbrella organization that unites fragmented groups for collective action (Bettencourt, 1996). GROs maintain coalitions and leadership between groups and provide basic resources and technology.

2.4. Conceptualizing HSC as a GRO:

The case of HSC presents the tension between the governed and the government, showcasing the complex urban dynamics of subaltern urbanism. These dynamics of civil society have been studied and conceptualized in various ways in the discourse concerning subaltern urbanism witnessed in Indian cities. Chatterjee (2004) discusses a unique aspect of politics known as “political society,” which involves the entanglement between the elite and subaltern politics in rights, security, and welfare issues. Political society provides the space for negotiation and contestation with the governmental agencies for population groups that organizations like HSC represent (Chatterjee, 2004). The efforts of HSC also resonate with what Appadurai (2019) calls “deep democracy.” Deep democracy reframes the movements of the urban poor to the rights of citizenship that signify new modes of mediation for reclaiming urban space from the urban elites. Non-governmental actors, like the hawkers in this case, are ubiquitous parts of global governance and local democracy, and hence, they give rise to a new form of democracy that connects similar actors across the globe (Appadurai, 2009, p. 31).

Scholars bring forth many non-traditional aspects of HSC’s success in the hawkers’ movement of Kolkata. The hawkers forced themselves to be archived as a legitimate part of society, a tactic for marginalized groups that Bandyopadhyay (2011) calls the “politics of archiving” to establish themselves as a visible category of the public. HSC’s actions in Kolkata and its larger impacts on India’s hawking culture also negate the traditional ways of understanding cities as motions of urban infrastructure. Bandyopadhyay (2017; 2022) reimagines the hawkers’ movement in Kolkata as the politics of “‘durable obstruction’ that ‘spatialized motion’ or distributed motion across spaces” through the “organized encroachment of the sidewalks by hawkers” (2022, p. 206). HSC’s movements can also be understood through the lens of the “politics of inclusion,” coined by Roy (2009), to explain the ways GROs “seek to construct and manage a civic realm” (p. 160). The efforts to be included in civil society by the marginal groups represent “civic governmentality,” “a spatialized regime” that uses tools of mediation, knowledge production, and self-norms by the marginalized population (Roy, 2009, p. 160).

This paper positions itself around these critical discourses on the processes of the subaltern to gain rights in civil society by conceptualizing HSC as a GRO for various reasons. Firstly, HSC is constituted by grassroots actors for grassroots needs and acts at the grassroots level. This character distinguishes HSC from other union groups in Kolkata and India, which historically have been affiliated with political parties in contrast to HSC’s non-political aspirations. Secondly, the formation of HSC was a departure from the traditional protest against the hawker evictions by individual hawkers and unions to a more organized protest that involved the community for human rights beyond just hawkers’ interests. Thirdly, HSC acts more as an umbrella organization of hawkers and hawker’s unions than a union or association itself. This calls for an understanding of the workings of HSC as a grassroots agency rather than a union body. Finally, the expansion of HSC’s efforts to local, regional, national, and international levels resonates with the concept of deep democracy and calls for understanding how grassroots actions connect global grassroots actors in the neoliberal globalization processes. This characterization of HSC leans more towards the qualities of GROs than traditional union bodies whose realms typically remain localized. This paper, thus, presents the case of HSC as a success story of a GRO that has multi-level roles addressing issues of informal and marginalized economic actors beyond the scope of unions or associations.

3. Methods:

The study uses a multi-method approach to understand the role of HSC in formalizing the informal street hawkers and vendors in India. This includes an archival study of old newspaper articles and working documents of HSC, interviewing HSC board members and selected union leaders, focus group sessions with their member hawkers, and observation and photo documentation of HSC and hawkers' daily operations, protests and rallies, and their hawking and vending practices.

3.1. Archival Study

Due to the unavailability of online or published materials, the study relied on the archives of the HSC office located in Central Kolkata. The office has a collection of historical documents, including past newspaper articles on the eviction of hawkers across India, court cases fought by HSC, their meeting agendas and minutes, action plans, budget and spending calculations, documents on past workshops and events, action plans, proposals for vending and hawking space and stall designs, HSC strategic planning reports, and their constitution. The archives relevant to the study were scanned and converted to PDF for analysis. An archival study was conducted, and conversations with the HSC general secretary helped in understanding the history of the HSC and its roles, along with the dialogues it engages in with the government and the hawkers. Additionally, some published materials on rights and regulations about street hawkers in India were found on the website of the National Association of Street Vendors of India.

3.2. Interviews

The study organized a total of 36 semi-structured interviews in October 2022. These interviews included meetings with the HSC General Secretary, Vice President, and union leaders. The research also interviewed the Kolkata Corporation Mayor in Council and conducted a focus-group meeting of fifty hawkers representing the eight studied hawkers' unions. The interviews aimed to listen to the past, current, and future initiatives of the HSC governing board members who have been involved with the organization since its inception and the hawkers' and their union leaders' current challenges and future needs.

3.3. Observations and Photo Documentation

Following the interviews, the research conducted field visits to the vending locations of the interviewed hawkers' unions to capture their actions and behavior. The aim was to observe the hawkers' use of public spaces, understand the types of goods they sell, learn about their interactions with customers, and deal with authority personnel like the police. Short videos were recorded while walking through the streets where hawkers were present, and relevant still images were extracted from these videos. The research also photo-documented the annual Operation Sunshine Day procession of 2022, attended by thousands of hawkers' in the city, and the speeches offered by HSC leaders and other union leaders. The speeches were especially useful in gauging current issues of hawking and vending, ongoing actions, and future aspirations.

3.4. Data Analysis

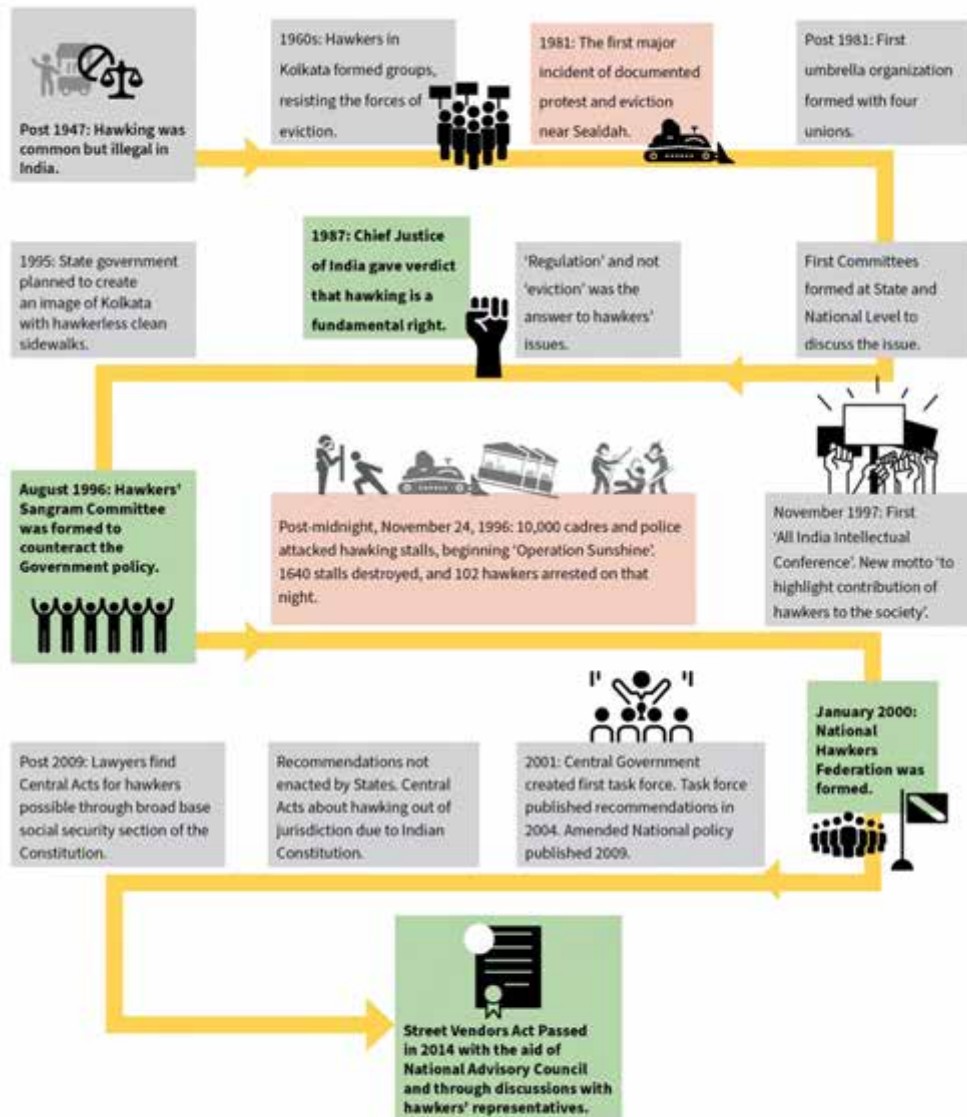
The interviews, originally in Bengali, are first translated and transcribed into English. Personal information found in the recorded audio is not included in the transcriptions. All the transcriptions are then imported into NVivo, a software used for qualitative analysis. Content analysis is done for the transcriptions using codes. The transcriptions are carefully read line by line, and each small idea is coded as one code. A total of approximately 270 different open codes are identified, followed by selective coding by unifying ideas. A set of selective codes is further grouped into themes to understand the roles of HSC at macro and micro levels, as described in the findings. Figure 1 shows an example of the coding process, depicting how raw interview data were used to generate themes that helped identify HSC's macro- and micro-level roles, such as its role as an arbitrator.

RAW DATA	OPEN CODING	SELECTIVE CODING	THEME
Yes, the Hawkers in Kolkata know about the union. When they face any issues they contact us and we go there so solve it.	Hawkers can address local concerns to Unions	Conflict resolution at local level	Role of an Arbitrator
We sort out that to allocate hawkers can where they can sit, what to say to the police.	Unions addressing conflicts with police		
Now they (police) have realized no one can remove them if they (the hawkers) are under any hawker's committee.			
We have to go out and look for instances of illegal hawking.	Unions looking out for illegal hawking		
Now, maybe there is political help, but we don't want to take that help because, in that case, we need to do a lot of favors for them.	No need for doing favors for any party	Non-political affiliation	
The plus point was that it was non-political platform, no personal need shall be there, so that there could be proper fight for the welfare of the society.	Welfare of hawkers is the main priority		
	No personal gains		
As far as I know what the central government is thinking or doing for the hawkers is done by the hands of this HSC. In this way, we do not have to rely on any political party	No reliance on any local political party		

Figure 2: Sample Coding Process

4. Findings:

HSC's efforts to formalize and legitimize informal street hawkers in Kolkata and India have been unique, unprecedented, and revolutionary. Their struggle for equal rights was ultimately rewarded by the central government's passing of the 2014 Street Vendors Act. Although the actual implementation of the Act is still underway, HSC's journey since its inception tells the story of how GROs operate to address grassroots social issues, in this case, to stop the eviction of the hawkers (Figure 3). Adapting Lahiri's (2022) interpretation of HSC's political strategies, this paper classifies HSC's role in formalizing the informal hawkers into macro and micro levels (Figure 4). The macro and micro level roles position HSC in the spectrum of the two extremes of the political society – the formal or established institutions versus the informal or marginalized groups. The study finds that GROs like HSC stand in between the formal and informal dichotomy and, in many ways, blur the boundaries between the state and civic. As Roy (2009) talks about the informality of India's planning regime characterized by deregulation, ambiguity, and exception, HSC's macro and micro-level roles give a perspective of ways GROs can take advantage of an informalized government structure to solve grassroots issues.



THE STORY OF STREET VENDORS ACT 2014

Figure 3: The Hawker Sangram Committee's Actions to Legalize Street Vendors in India

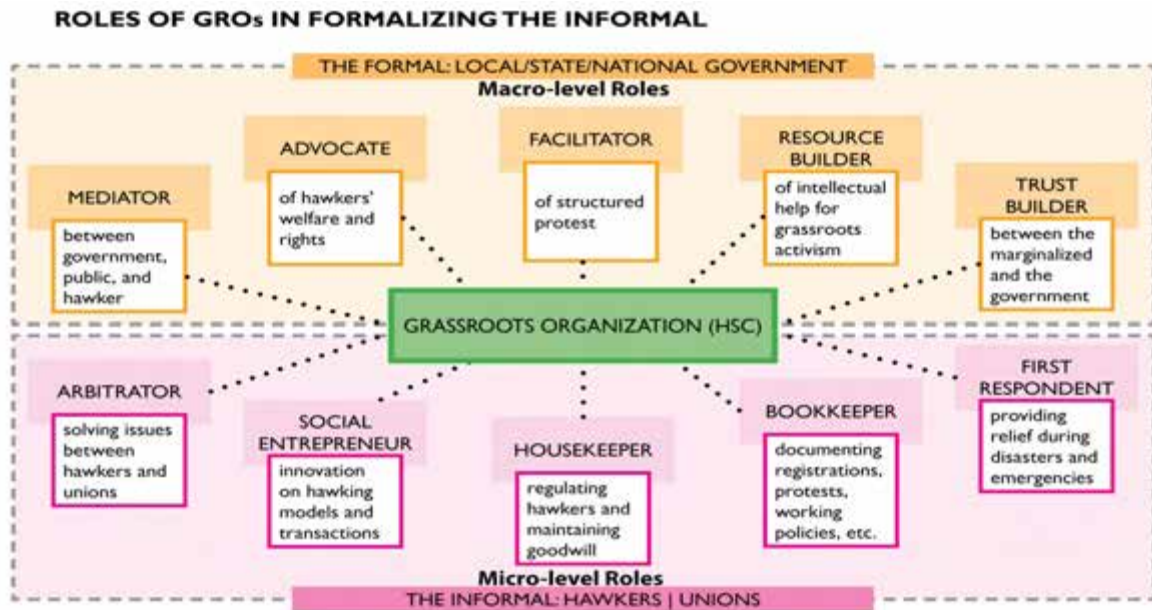


Figure 4: The Macro- and Micro-level Roles of GROs in Formalizing the Informal

4.1. Macro-level Roles:

Macro-level roles of HSC are carried out through its relationship with the formal sector at the municipal, state, and national scales. HSC takes crucial initiatives to present local grassroots issues to higher authorities that can provide more permanent and universal solutions. While the HSC was initially formulated to protest an eviction issue in central Kolkata, over the years, HSC has facilitated the formation of state and national-level GROs that eventually resulted in the passing of the 2014 National Vendors Act. The multifarious roles played by the HSC at the macro level can be defined as that of a mediator, an advocate, a facilitator, a resource builder, and a trust builder.

4.1.1. Mediator

HSC acts as a mediator between the government, the public, and the hawkers when hawkers' needs are beyond the scope of HSC or the unions and, therefore, require government interventions. Vending zones create conflicts among pedestrian users and hawkers as the Vendors' Act allows only 1/3 of the sidewalk width for vending, which is difficult to enforce in narrow sidewalks of older parts of the city. HSC works on finding alternate vending designs/plans and better vending zones that will resolve such conflicts. HSC also mediates conflicts over the relocation of vendors, which often affects customer access to hawkers. In many such relocations, major thoroughfares create barriers because of the lack of adequate pedestrian infrastructure like crosswalks, pedestrian signals, subways, or foot overbridges. Other needs for mediation include creating parking spaces near big natural markets and involving hawkers in the relocation plans to identify suitable locations for hawkers in case displacement is necessary for valid development purposes. HSC's major act of mediation has been the inclusion of a Town Vending Committee (TVC) in each city in the 2014 Act to increase grassroots representation in the government. TVC is to be composed of 40% hawkers, 10% NGOs, and the rest members of the city council with an aim to keep a directory of hawkers, issue hawking licenses controlling their numbers up to 2.5% of the total population, and demarcate vending and non-vending zones to avoid encroachment issues of street vending. TVC works for the welfare of the hawkers and the city government or the public and has been the first-ever attempt to create a formal and informal coalition. Organizing annual rallies and protests also form an important role of the HSC in reminding the government of their presence and solidarity among the associations, as pointed out by the Secretary of the Ballygunge Hawkers Association: "I think they are very important. To have the organization working and keep it strong, these gatherings are vital. These are the 'tactics.'"

4.1.2. Advocate

HSC advocates for the welfare and rights of hawkers. Although TVCs are responsible for the facilities and benefits of hawkers, the committee is not yet fully functional. In its absence, HSC advocates for the needs and demands of its member unions and hawkers to the KMC. HSC presents proposals to alleviate hawkers' working conditions, including access to basic infrastructure, healthcare, financial benefits, and better vending zones and structures. Basic infrastructure, such as access to drinking water, electricity, and toilets, especially for women hawkers, is a dire need for many hawkers. "There is no problem with water, but the toilet is a problem. This problem is very common here." (Secretary of the Kalighat Vivekananda Hawker committee). The Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation (CESC) is reluctant to provide electricity to the shops for fire risks due to the use of combustible materials like plastic in the shops. The inability to afford electricity forces some hawkers to run businesses only in daylight or to borrow electricity connections from nearby big shops and residential homes at higher prices. HSC also urges KMC to provide durable, sustainable, safe, and aesthetically pleasing shops and stalls for the hawkers to diminish environmental and fire hazards and elevate the city's beauty and has provided concept designs of stalls by partnering with a food service equipment company (Congas). Other issues HSC advocates for are government-led awareness workshops and health camps for hawkers, access to existing social benefits like health insurance cards and student credit cards, newer policies for bank loans for hawkers, and office spaces for the unions like other government employees.

4.1.3. Facilitator

Without formal initiatives to legalize hawking and vending, the HSC acted as the facilitator of the legalization of street hawkers in India. Hawkers' unions existed before the formation of HSC but operated in fragments in their respective geographic areas. The unions hardly interacted or worked together due to the absence of a unifying body. HSC provided a structure for hawkers' fight against displacement by uniting the fragmented hawkers' unions of the city under one umbrella, facilitating a common platform for expression. "This platform had given right to the hawkers and also gave the place so that they can be united. Many people who cannot share their problems got a platform to share and raise their voice against all the odds," explained the General Secretary of HSC. With the help of HSC, the unions and their hawkers could stand in solidarity to fight against the government and be more powerful than remaining siloed in their respective unions. HSC also structured the revolution by conducting organized protests and processions, slowly gaining momentum from the local level to the state level and then to the national level. HSC also facilitated the creation of a hierarchical structure for organizing the street vendors and hawkers by forming the NHF. NHF worked for the unification of hawkers from other states and spearheaded the hawkers' protests of eviction at state and national levels. The 2014 Act was possible owing to the unified nature of the protest and the systematic way grassroots actions were taken to the national level. Currently, NHF is led by the Central Secretariat, and state leaderships represent hawkers' unions across the states.

4.1.4. Resource Builder

Hawkers need intellectual help in their fight for equal rights. The hawkers, union leaders, and HSC leaders did not have the capacity in terms of education, skill, or power to materialize their strategies to prevent the eviction of hawkers. They seek help from the "face of the society" to support their cause, gain public attention, and contribute through their expertise. HSC held an intellectual conference where they brought together big personalities like film stars, singers, poets, social activists, lawyers, scholars, teachers, and even ministers. "In 1997 we organized an 'intellectual conference'. There was no intellectual in West Bengal who did not attend" (HSC General Secretary). These pioneers of the society brainstormed strategies, slogans, and action plans to modify the perception of hawkers. The intellectuals' involvement helped them modify their "motto of the revolution from fighting against eviction to studying the contribution of hawkers in society," stated the HSC General Secretary. It is also important to note that initially, the Spatial Purification Movements, like OS, were glorified by poets and singers to uplift the aesthetics of the city. Hence, it was even more important to include prominent personalities who could be insistent against such glorifications and make a case for the hawkers on humanitarian grounds. Intellectuals like lawyers were an integral part of their success as they helped them win court cases against the government, helped formulate policies into laws, and laws into acts. The current president of the NHF is a veteran

lawyer who assists in passing hawking and vending laws nationwide. HSC also collaborated with local scholars to find national and international research articles and case studies about the rights of informal hawkers and their legitimization process to legitimize their claims for hawking and vending rights in the country.

4.1.5. Trust Builder

The past eviction events made hawkers distrust the government's willingness to help the marginalized. HSC was crucial in reinstating that trust between the hawkers and the city officials. This was achieved through efforts on multiple fronts. HSC maintains a non-political status by operating on neutral grounds, avoiding political patronage, and attaining its objectives through systematic and democratic means. Historically, hawkers and unions were affiliated with political parties and used for political agendas as vote banks. However, during the spatial purification movement, the political parties supported the evictions regardless of their connection with the unions. Historically, informal hawkers have earned their livelihood by paying bribes to the police and being exploited by political leaders to find ways into the workforce. Periods of despair and ignorance instigated a sense of distrust toward authority and government. An organization concerned for its true welfare seemed surreal to them. HSC gained this trust by employing hawkers as union members and leaders. Similarly, HSC leaders belong to the working class and lead a lifestyle similar to the hawkers. This was unlike previous instances of politically patronized hawkers' unions where union leaders were often political party members, aspiring to become ministers and leading a fancier lifestyle than their member hawkers. Being apolitical helped the HSC, as stated by a union representative from Kalikapur Hawkers' Association, "The plus point was that it was a non-political platform, no personal need shall be there so that there could be a proper fight for the welfare of the society. Gaining public trust by highlighting hawkers' contribution to society is another major achievement of HSC. As many residents, especially the middle and upper cohorts, deemed hawkers as eyesores of cities, a way to gain their support was to take human rights ground and showcase the contribution of the hawkers to society. Hawkers run a parallel economy that alleviates poverty, helps with unemployment, creates a huge economic turnover, and provides shopping convenience at the doorstep. HSC encourages its member unions to maintain goodwill with the residents of the neighborhoods where they vend and hawk, ask reasonable prices for their goods, provide services like product return options and home delivery opportunities when needed, and have "eyes on the street" for the area's safety.

4.2. Micro-level Roles

GROs like HSC are vital community support for the grassroots population. In addition to communicating the grassroots' needs to local, state, and national authorities, HSC has taken several steps to address the micro-level needs of the unions and the hawkers. These are local needs that can be resolved by HSC and do not always need to be brought to the government. At the micro-level, HSC performs the roles of an arbitrator, a social entrepreneur, a local problem solver, a housekeeper, and a bookkeeper.

4.2.1. Arbitrator

Issues with informal hawking exist at multiple levels and on multiple scales. While some issues need interventions from higher authorities, such as dealing with court cases, stopping evictions, or formulating acts, other trivial issues are left under the unions' jurisdiction. Unions deal with minor hawker-related issues, such as managing vending and hawking zones, illegal hawking, police interference, or other local issues. The president of the All-India Women's Hawkers Federation stated, "We sort out that to decide where the hawkers can sit... what we can tell the police, all these things." The individual unions are responsible for employing rules and policies and regulating hawking in their respective geographic areas. If a conflict or an issue arises locally, the area's union leader is first to be approached. The union leaders make the first attempt to resolve the conflict. If the issue cannot be solved at the union level or is beyond the union's scope, the union leaders present the issue to HSC during their monthly meetings. HSC here acts as a body for arbitration. It is important to maintain the hierarchy and mode of operation to address grassroots issues. HSC holds neutral ground for being non-political and not having any vested interest in individual hawking and vending areas. The hawkers always respect HSC decisions as they appreciate the organization's and its leadership's benevolence, which has been fighting for hawkers' rights. Also, as most union

leaders are vendors or hawkers, their opinions may sometimes create conflicts of interest. HSC possesses no such conflicts. The issues mostly brought to HSC concern new hawkers' registration or spatial conflicts between two street vendors. Since the number of hawkers in existing vending zones is limited, HSC typically sends the new vendors and hawkers to a new market area that can accommodate newcomers. Union leaders do not have the authority to assign a hawker to a zone and, therefore, resort to HSC for such arbitration needs.

4.2.2. Social Entrepreneur

The modes of commerce are constantly changing in the contemporary world. As grassroots individuals like street hawkers and vendors do not have the resources to adapt to that change, GROs like HSC must act as social entrepreneurs to help them with new and innovative ways of vending and hawking to keep up with other shops and retailers. Many hawkers reside below the poverty level and have limited access to modern technology for economic transactions, such as smartphones, online banking, or mobile banking. This limits their ability to cater to younger generations and middle and higher economic groups of customers who often prefer to use such transaction modes for convenience over cash transactions. Hawkers' livelihoods are also threatened by online shopping giants like Amazon, Flipkart, Swiggy, Zomato, and others, which steal their customers, especially the tech-savvy young population. While addressing such shortcomings needs more formal initiatives, hawkers and union leaders rely on HSC for innovative ways to compete with the changing economic environment. One of the ways HSC tackles the situation is to encourage hawkers to match or sell at lower prices than online vendors with options for return and refund. Alongside this, HSC has been organizing workshops to train hawkers to use Paytm and other forms of cashless transactions. These transactions require hawkers and vendors to have bank accounts, online access, and smartphones, which many of them, especially those from rural areas, do not have. HSC has created a working relationship with local banks as guarantors for creating bank accounts and online banking options for their hawkers. In addition, HSC planned to establish an online association with hawkers as suggested by a union representative, "We once decided to take an initiative to open a website named hawkerbazaar.com - where the hawkers themselves would deliver the things and essentials at the doorsteps." However, this initiative was affected by the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2.3. Housekeeper

With the lack of government initiatives, HSC continues to perform housekeeping tasks to regulate in-house hawkers and maintain their goodwill to society. In the absence of the TVC, the HSC manages new union formations, existing union affiliations, and new hawker registrations with the KMC. When a group of hawkers is interested in forming a union under the affiliation of HSC, the committee hears their appeal and sends them the constitution to be adopted and followed. The HSC General Secretary stated, "We identify a set of leadership positions among them like a president, a secretary, a working president, a treasurer, and working committee members." HSC then sets a fee structure and defines norms, such as having meeting minutes, taking decisions unanimously, and, when required, taking decisions through voting. Any new union under HSC is reported to the NHF and included in a national list of unions. HSC requires the union leaders and their hawkers to attend HSC meetings, conferences, and other assemblies, pay dues and comply with the HSC-defined constitution to maintain their affiliations. HSC and individual union leaders look after preventing illegal hawking in their respective jurisdictions. Another major housekeeping task for HSC is ensuring its member unions maintain goodwill in the community.

4.2.4. Bookkeeper

Without the TVC, the HSC performs the bookkeeping tasks for all its member unions and hawkers. Even before passing the 2014 ACT, HSC strategized to document the protest process systematically so that it could be used to present an authentic claim locally, regionally, nationally, and even internationally. HSC archived and kept records of each meeting, conference, rally, procession, eviction action, court case, and notable event, including news articles on hawkers' evictions. Since there was no official log of the street vendors and hawkers in the city, an important aim of bookkeeping was to survey hawkers and keep records. HSC kept a count of the number of hawkers in the city, the types of items they sell, hawking and vending modes, and vending zones. This was important to manage and organize the hawkers during protest rallies. Bookkeeping also helps HSC oversee where hawkers need to be unionized or reach out to unions not affiliated with HSC. In addition to keeping records, HSC surveyed

the conditions of their member hawkers and vendors and published regular reports on their socio-economic profiles. They also published conference and academic papers, newspaper articles, proformas, and memorandums and kept minutes of meetings to organize their efforts. Since its inception in 1996, HSC has maintained and archived files in its small office in Central Kolkata. Due to space limitations, they have been working since 2018 on digitizing the documents and making them available to the public through the NHF website. As TVC is not active yet, HSC oversees managing vending licenses and hawker registrations. HSC bookkeeping also maintains a dossier of member unions, leadership, and hawker information. Earlier, the hawkers did not have identity cards. "That time, we didn't have cards. We used to give pictures and signatures according to our post (Secretary of the Ballygunge Hawkers Association). The HSC issues hawkers' identity cards, collects membership dues, and maintains funds to run regular activities. Since 2020, they have been able to computerize and expedite the registration process. This has been an important achievement for the HSC. Since the number of hawkers in the city is increasing, it has been difficult to maintain physical records. Nonetheless, HSC hopes that TVC will take over this job soon, as HSC operates with limited staff, most of whom are hawkers and can only participate in HSC activities part-time.

4.2.5. First Responders

Unlike formal shopkeepers or business owners, informal street hawkers and vendors are more vulnerable to natural calamities and other disasters. As government reliefs in such events do not reach these informal cohorts, HSC performs as first responders on such occasions. Both before and after the passing of the 2014 Act, HSC has been the "go-to" place for local hawkers and vendors. The street vendors and hawkers mostly use temporary and cheap building materials like plastics, tin shades, and bamboo structures, which are prone to destruction during storms, cyclones, heavy rain during the monsoon season, and fire. These disasters have economic consequences since they do not have business insurance, often leading to total business loss. Street vendors and hawkers have relied on HSC's help to recover from such downfalls without any other means of revival. During many such disasters, including the recent COVID-19 pandemic, HSC collected donations, food and sanitation items, clothing, and stationeries and provided them to the hawkers whose livelihoods were affected. On the occasion of the unfortunate deaths of hawkers, HSC offers their vending rights to immediate family members to support them in times of turbulence.

5. Conclusion:

Even though the 2014 Act legitimized hawking in India, a full formalization of street vending and hawking is yet to be accomplished. A decade after the Act was passed, the formation of a TVC in Kolkata and many other cities is still in process. Formal authorities tend to be reluctant to meet the needs of the informal population (Bhowmik, 2000; Joshi, 2018), as is apparent in the case of street vending in India. The demands for equal rights, permanent shops, and basic facilities are deemed unnecessary or are not prioritized by the authorities. The demand for permanent and durable vending stalls is ignored, with the perception that "hawkers should remain hawkers and not try to be shop owners," as expressed by the mayor of the Council of KMC when interviewed. The Act also requires KMC to survey the current hawkers in the city to monitor their numbers, vending zones, and items they sell. The survey was recently finished but created immense unrest among the hawkers due to several aspects of illegality and associated corruption. Interviews with the hawkers revealed that the Act has not fully gained their trust and reliance on the government. They consider the HSC, especially their general secretary Shaktiman Ghosh, their "savior" and sole means to deal with the government. The police and political leaders are the "opportunists" who help the hawkers for their own benefit. The decade-long hiatus of the actual implementation of the Act, especially the skepticism of TVC's workings, has rekindled the long-held distrust and hatred against the government among the informal street hawkers.

It is apparent that the major issue of street hawking is encroachment, which is allowed by politicians and the police in exchange for bribes from hawkers. In some recent "anti-encroachment" and "hawker pushback" drives by KMC to clear off city streets from hawkers, clashes occurred between the law enforcement officers and the hawkers who demanded that they were allowed to sell in those locations by the authorities (Zeeshan, 2024). The current chief minister of the state criticized these actions, supporting hawkers' claim, saying, "I do not believe in first allowing encroachers and then using bulldozers. I want restrictions to be imposed from the beginning,"

and warned the authorities, declaring, “Politicians who incite hawkers will be arrested, regardless of their party affiliation, and police officers supporting them will either be arrested by their superiors or removed from their positions” (Ghosh & Banerjee, 2024). In the interviews, many hawkers revealed the chief minister’s party’s endorsement of their welfare. They also expressed their distrust of the previous government, which initiated the spatial purification movements in the 1970s and 1990s. Similar issues of hawking politics can be observed in other Indian cities, such as Mumbai, where a similar eviction drive has invoked the questions of hawkers’ rights and legality (Pinto, 2024). Nevertheless, marginalized populations like street vendors are significant voting assets for politicians and are often manipulated for political gain (Bandyopadhyay, 2024).

GROs like the HSC are the backbone of the informal population and economy, with or without the brace of formal institutions. Street vendors and hawkers would not have thrived or survived without their support, let alone been legalized. GROs are the missing link in the overlapping, often conflicting spheres of the formal and the informal. In polarized societies like India, the formal and the informal lie at the extreme ends of the population cohort. Their interdependency and interrelationship are full of friction, which, perhaps, can only be lessened by means of GROs. The HSC was formed to stop eviction, but its role and importance did not stop after inhuman evictions were stopped and hawkers became legal in India. It continued to exist even more actively because of the limitation of formal institutions in effectively attending to the needs and demands of the marginalized.

In a country where the neoliberal economy is channeled by the pressure of development forces to create neoliberalizing middle classes and the new rich (Fernandes, 2004), the informal economy supports the urban poor. With patterns of political and climate migrations around the world, the informal economy has been and will remain the lifeline of immigrants (Mingione, 1999; Rodgers, Shahid, & Williams, 2019). Since formal institutions do not have any vested interest or benefit from the informal economy (Huang, Xue, & Wang, 2019), GROs like HSC will continue to be the lifeline of the informal population. Street vending and vendors have thrived, not just in India but worldwide, through the changing epochs of society and the economy (Morales, 2007). The challenges that vendors encounter in India may be unique. However, issues such as bribery, harassment, lack of licensing, confiscation of goods, and eviction drives are problems that vendors face in almost every city worldwide. As political, social, and economic variables change, hawkers and vendors innovate and improvise to adapt. This research sheds light on one of the many such ways the actors of the informal economy perform. A universal generalization of the informal economy is unreasonable (Williams & Round, 2007), and therefore, the case of HSC may be unique and not the only way grassroots continue to exist and excel. Perhaps a comparative analysis of other cases around the world will provide a holistic insight into the ubiquitous relationship between the GROs and the informal economy.

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