



Struggles for Spaces: Everday Life of a Woman Street Vendor in Delhi

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Abstract

This paper deals with the variety of forms of struggle for space in a city which a woman vendor experiences in her everyday life through the narrative of Gomiben who lives in an urban resettlement colony in west Delhi. She lives with multiple identities which are often marginalized and oppressed. Violence, both visible and structural, creates barriers in her trade and ultimately in her life. There are no social security measures and due to the nature of her job she is also deprived of education and other benefits in life. However, she works tirelessly day after day and deconstructs the social constructs of gender, poverty, migrancy and so on to advocate for herself and her fellow vendors their rightful space in the capital city. Urban planning fails to take stock of her demands and she is often invisible and found in informal pockets of modern cityscapes. Delhi, in particular, refuses to give her much deserved space and she is often positioned where she cannot continue her trade for long due to lack of buyers. However, despite the challenges she continues to struggle with hope in 'limited situations' and is still very positive towards life.

Keywords: Urban space, street vendor, lived experiences, invisible skills.

“Seher main kuch bhi bada mall, rasta ya flyover banta hai toh humme khushi nahi hoti, kyuki inse sirf aamiron ko hi faida hota hai....humme nahi....ye seher mera bhi toh hai,” Gomiben says. (A new big Mall or a flyover in the city doesn't make me happy as only the rich are benefitted and not people like me.. But the city belongs to me too).

Space for a 'street vendor' in the city is highly contested. Street as a public space gets defined as legal-illegal, mainstream-periphery, beautiful-ugly and so on. It shows how streetscapes are shaped through the interplay of politics, planning and the local political economy. In urban planning, public space has historically been described as an “open space”, meaning the streets, parks and recreation areas, plazas and other publicly owned and managed

outdoor spaces, as opposed to the private domain of housing and works. However, recent evolution of the forms of urban settlement and the growing number and variety of semi-public spaces managed by private-public or entirely private partnerships questions this notion inherited from a legal perspective. Somehow today, public space needs to be understood as being different from the public domain of the state and its sub-divisions. Rather, it needs to be understood as a space accessible to the public. In terms of law, it is perhaps closer to the older concept of the “commons”, although we have to recognize that today, at least in the Western world, every bit of land is regulated by laws of property making it difficult to consider anything as common without encountering an entitled owner and manager (Blackmar 2006).

Street as a public space is contested as it changes and takes various forms for many marginalized groups. Street vendors occupy one of the largest and most visible occupational groups in the informal economy which is found in the public space ‘street’. Contemporary urban India has seen multiple transformations in the post-1991 period because of various forms of exclusion for the urban poor. A street vendor’s narrative in this socio-political scenario is not only captivating but it also shows how his or her social life and livelihood are regulated on the street through various forces. Though the license-permit raj in the Indian bureaucracy ended for most retailing in the 1990s, it continues in this trade. Inappropriate license ceilings in Delhi are high which makes the street vendors prone to the bribery and extortion under the local police and municipal authorities, besides harassment, heavy fines and sudden evictions.

Women’s participation in the economy has been neglected and has often been invisible as they have been working primarily in the informal economy. Lack of exposure to the formal economy and the job market has kept their status in society also low despite their contributing substantially to the labour force. There have been many reasons why women’s work has been restricted to the informal sector wherein the work does not come under the purview of economic activities. As a result of this most of these women do not even realize their skill levels and competence. Even today more than 80 per cent of the women workers are engaged in the informal sector which does not offer fair wages or even decent terms of work. Another important concern is the under-enumeration of women’s work in India. Only about 25 per cent of the Indian women reported that they were employed in 2004, the year preceding the National Family Health Survey III. According to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, there were more than 10 million (1 crore) street vendors in India, and Delhi had the second largest number of approximately 2,00,000 street vendors. Most of them were immigrants or laid-off workers, who on an average worked for 10–12 hours a day and remained impoverished. Women in the unorganized sector do not have regular employer-employee relationships, and so they work under conditions of economic and social insecurity. In the urban areas this sector includes workers in small manufacturing, street vending, domestic services and transport. The size of the unorganized sector has been growing and it now accounts for 91.5 per cent of the workforce. This includes the rural workforce as well. Studies have shown that the earnings of informal sector workers are about one-third that of formal sector workers. At the same time their work is insecure, in that they are not sure of their earnings the next day (Jhabvala 2003). The National Commission on Self-Employed Women Workers (1987) in the unorganized sector recorded this sector as one in which women do arduous work as piece-rated, casual or unpaid workers. The commission reported that women in the unorganized sector are paid extremely low wage rates with total lack of job security. Workers in the unorganized sector are also prone to exploitation, appalling working conditions and high risks of health hazards.

The second National Commission on labour under the chairmanship of Shri Ravinder Verma submitted in the year 2002 proposed the umbrella legislation for the protection and welfare of workers in the unorganized sectors which mainly provides for the registration of such workers by providing them identity cards to them and setting up of State wise Unorganized sector welfare boards etc. Education, Training and Skill development and procedure of grievances redressal etc., is also provided in the proposed umbrella legislation (Khan 2010: 7). These provisions find mention today in the Bill on street vendors which has been passed recently.

Conceptually, street vendors are one of the important components of the urban informal economy. This component is integrally related to the informal economy. Street vendors occupy a significant proportion of the total employment in the informal sector. Street vending units constitute a significant share of the total enterprises in the urban informal sector. Despite that street vendors face a lot of challenges and biases from local government representatives and also in urban policies and regulations. Street vendors are not wanted by the elite and thus they are often regarded as ‘eye sores’.

‘Decent work’ can be defined as protective work wherein the rights of workers, specifically their employment, income and social rights are protected. This can be achieved without compromising workers’ rights and social standards. This will ensure a reduction in poverty by increasing work opportunities, rights actualization at work, social protection and providing a voice to the workers which in turn will result in improving workers’ capabilities and their overall well-being (ILO 1999; Rodgers 2001; Chen et al. 2004; Takala 2005).

Theoretical background

Literature on urban public spaces in cities tries to examine how these can be better designed for the poor who are dependent on such spaces. Brown (2006) explores the concept of an urban public space and its importance for the poor. She concludes that although urban public space is a common property resource, it is not static; it is a shifting resource whose boundaries may change quickly over time as a result of social negotiation. Another issue addressed in literature is that government interventions towards the informal sector are particularly related to its business operations (Suharto 2004). Those in the informal sector do their work in areas that can be called public spaces and which were originally not meant for trading purposes. As a result the most common issue that crops up due to vending in these areas is that of legal and illegal space. This makes the traders victims of harassment and threats from the police and other government authorities. Harvey (1973) argues that to understand cities it is important to understand how human practices create distinctive conceptualizations of space, spatiality and legality. By exploring the concept of social justice and its relationship to urban spatial systems, the role of land as a commodity and the spatial implications of economic production, people can achieve urbanization that is not built on the exploitation of the poor. He states that in the context of a city, the question is not, “what is space?”, but rather “how is it that different human practices create and make use of distinctive conceptualizations of space?” Studies have also been carried out which have expounded on rights to the use of public space. For example, according to Mitchell (2003), unlike other spaces in a city, which are increasingly being created for people rather than by the people, public spaces are important in that they are sites for the articulation and demand of rights and citizenship. Lynch (1981) states that even though much of the literature assumes that urban public space is a common property resource to which everyone has equal and free rights of access, in many instances this is not the case because it has competing uses. Urban

researchers like Roy (2005) have specifically focused on the way street vendors in New York, although a public nuisance in the eyes of city authorities, in fact produce safe public spaces and enhance the quality of life in the neighbourhoods in which they work.

Women street vendors in Delhi

The definition of a street vendor as included in the National Policy on Urban Street Vendors is: “A street vendor is a person who offers goods or services for sale to the public without having a permanently built structure but with a temporary static structure or mobile stall (or head-load).” Street vendors could be stationary and occupy space on the pavements or other public/private areas, or could be mobile, and move from place to place carrying their wares on push carts or on cycles or baskets on their heads, or could sell their wares in moving buses. The Government of India has used the term “urban vendor” as inclusive of both traders and service providers, stationary as well as mobile, and incorporates all other local/region specific terms used to describe them such as hawker, *pheriwalla*, *rehri-patriwalla*, footpath *dukandars*, sidewalk traders and more.

The recent Protection of Street Vendors and Regulation of the Street Vending Bill states in para 2 (1)(m) that a street vendor is a person engaged in vending of articles, goods, wares, food items or merchandise of everyday use or offering services to the general public on a street, lane, side walk, footpath, pavement, public park or any other public place or private area or from a temporary built up structure or by moving from place to place, and includes hawkers, peddlers, squatters and all other synonymous terms which may be local or region specific.

The most striking features of a street vendor in the definitions above are space, work and urban. Work in an urban space is strenuous and when the “worker” is unskilled, the conditions get extremely difficult for sustainable livelihood. Matters get further aggravated when it is a woman vendor as public space is gendered in a place like Delhi. Moreover many cast doubts on a woman who is not-so-well-educated.

Everyday lives, and ‘lived experiences’

A snapshot of their everyday life reflects different images, symbols and spaces which categorize women street vendors as being “hopeless poor”. A closer look and daily interaction with them tell a different story. They are struggling with hope and articulate their stories with a lot of enthusiasm like any other city dweller. They have organized themselves into unions and do not shy away from voicing their opinion about their lived experiences. Among the many women working in the unorganized sector, and considering the variety of work that they are engaged in, women street vendors have a very different profile; they also have to face multi-dimensional challenges. It is difficult to describe a ‘typical’ street vendor. A street vendor may be little girl sitting at a street corner to sell green masala, or he may be a moustached man with a cell phone selling electronic items in the heart of a metro’s commercial centre. He may be a small farmer who has come to sell his vegetables in the urban *haat* (market) or she may be an embroiderer selling cushion covers to tourists. However, all street vendors belong to the vast urban informal sector and have to depend on this uncertain form of entrepreneurship to earn a living (Jhavbala 2003). This group of women is semi-skilled or is popularly regarded as being unskilled. But a closer look exhibits extraordinary business and communication skills without any formal training. The invisible skills of these women help them survive immense difficulties on a day-to-day basis. They are ready to go anywhere in search of customers. In Delhi they are found everywhere in different kinds of markets: stationary or regular, weekly, daily or even

mobile. But in all forms their struggle is in finding customers and buyers of their products. Studies show that the largest concentration of vendors is in the age group 16–35 years. Vending involves enormous physical labour. A vendor starts early in the morning with the day's purchase. The marketing place is invariably far from his residence. Bringing large sacks of vegetables and fruits and loading them in a rickshaw cart is a tedious job. Arranging, cleaning, sorting, weighing and dealing with customers is also not easy. Hawkers are on the move from one lane to another irrespective of the heat, wind, rain and cold. Calling out loud to attract buyers consumes time and energy and there are no social security measures for them (Bhowmik 2007).

Gomiben's story

This is the life of Gomiben, a 36-year-old widow street vendor, who lives in Raghbir Nagar, an urban resettlement colony just behind the big malls in Rajouri Garden in west Delhi. In this area lives the Gujarati community Baghri or Devipujok jati who mostly do vending of old clothes. The Baghri community migrated from Gujarat a few decades ago. Like other Baghri people in the community, Gomiben's family has also been involved in old cloth vending for generations. She started vending at the age of 11 years. She was a class 6 student then. Gomiben was good at studies. Initially, she rarely went out for vending with her relatives or parents. Gradually, the frequency of her casual vending started increasing and by class 8, she had dropped out of school. Her parents, family and relatives had the view that they only needed to carry forward the tradition of vending and so there was no point in wasting money on education. So, Gomiben became a full time old cloth vendor at the age of 13 years. She got married at the age of 15 years to an old cloth vendor from the same community.

The first five years of marriage were troublesome with family issues and she got divorced from the same man thrice during those five years. Members of the Baghri community do not go for legal divorce. They have their own panchayat which resolves such matters. They have a very interesting way of getting separation. Once both the sides agree for a split and the panchayat gives the verdict, they break clay pots in their names and the wife has to return all her ornaments to her in-laws. After the separation, the couple can go their own separate ways or marry the same person later on. Thus, Gomiben got divorced from the same man thrice and each time remarried him. Eventually, things got better and she patched up with her husband. She had a smooth married life for the next eight years. She became a mother of three children. When she was pregnant with the third child, her husband suffered from an unknown disease and remained ill for five months. They tried all the medication possible but her husband passed away 15 days before the birth of her third and only girl child. He left a debt of Rs 5 lakh behind. Out of that sum, Rs 3.5 lakh was a home loan for their 25 square yards one-room house. The remaining Rs 1.5 lakh was borrowed for medical expenses for her husband's treatment. Gomiben says, *"hamare Baghri samaj me log sochte hain ki accha ilaj sirf private hospital mein he hoti hai.....sarkari toh akhri mein aata hai.....isliye sab log udhar karke bhi private mein ilaj karwate hain.....hamare jati ki kisi bhi ghar mein 1-1.5 lakh ka karja toh sabka hi hai"* (In our Baghri community, people believe good treatment is possible only in private hospitals and government hospitals are the last option. So, we do not hesitate to take huge loans to pay for private medical treatment. The average outstanding debt in our community would be Rs 1–1.5 lakh).

So, Gomiben took a big medical loan for her husband's treatment from a person in her locality whom they knew and who was kind enough not to charge interest on the loan. Her husband died at the age of 32. She was 27-years-old then with three children. Since then, she has

been struggling for herself and her children. Her children are studying in school now and she is keen that they become educated and do well in their lives.

A snapshot from life—her daily routine

Every day, Gomiben gets ready at 4 am and goes to the nearby cloth market which they call 'mandi'. The mandi is held near the Ghorewala Mandir, a temple right in Raghbir Nagar. She says that some people reach by 2 am to get a suitable place in the mandi to sell their old clothes. There is always a struggle and strong competition for space to sit in the mandi. In order to find a place, one needs to occupy it as early as possible. By 10 am 'byaparis' or buyers come to the market. Some buyers come to buy pieces for themselves, but mostly they come for wholesale buying. Gomiben says, "Actually, most of us vendors have to sell our collected old clothes by weight. For every kilogram of old clothes, the price ranges from Rs 1.5 to Rs 5. Only a few selected pieces of good quality clothes are sold separately. A good old silk saree may be sold for Rs 100–200, but generally a normal cotton saree is worth only Rs 10–15. Most vendors do not manage to clean, repair and sell old clothes on their own because they do not have enough time. Therefore, they sell their clothes at wholesale rates. The better-off vendors in the community who do not go collecting clothes themselves usually buy these clothes; they store, clean and darn them and then sell them."

Gomiben also sells her clothes at wholesale rates as she does not have the time to invest in mending, patching and selling the pieces at a better rate. By mid-morning every day, she has sold off her old clothes. By 11am she comes to a shop selling utensils to buy goods including steel utensils as per the demand of the customers. The number of utensils she buys depends on how much capital she can invest daily or weekly. Sometimes she gets only 2–3 buckets or a few steel plates. Gomiben says, "*Ajkal mobile hone se bahut subidha ho gayi hai. Kuch grahak aise hain jeenko hum kafi dino se jante hain.....woh log hummen phone kar dete hain jab bhi unke pass kapde jama ho jaate hain aur unko kaun sa bartan chahiye*" (Mobile phones have come as a blessing for us. Some of our old customers phone and tell us whenever they have old clothes piled up at home and what utensils they want in exchange). So she buys those utensils accordingly. Only a few vendors can afford to buy utensils in bulk. Most of them buy utensils of daily use. After buying the utensils Gomiben goes out for vending, that is, collecting old clothes. She then travels from one neighbourhood to another, shouting out loud to attract the attention of women in middle class households. She roams around for the whole day moving from colony to colony seeking old clothes as barter. Old customers do not often call people like Gomiben for business. They call them once in a blue moon. So, they have no choice but to go around looking for new customers every day.

Her work does not allow her to think much about food. She does not eat regular meals. Whatever and whenever she gets something, she eats it. Sometime, some lady is kind enough to offer them food. Otherwise they have to buy it. Gomiben buys from street stalls food like chole bhature or chowmien or roti-sabji. She does not get time to cook. Children in such homes are generally given money to eat some food from food stalls during the day. After roaming for the entire day collecting old clothes, Gomiben gets back home around 8–8.30 pm. She has a cup of tea and then cooks rotis for dinner or asks somebody else at home to cook instead. By 9.30–10 pm she is back at work sorting out the collected clothes. She sorts out clothes according to the quality and of a piece and how old it is. This takes time depending on what she has managed to collect during the day. She has to finish all this before she sleeps as she needs to sell these clothes the next morning. She then makes separate bundles of clothes and keeps them ready to

sell the next day. By midnight, she finally goes to sleep, only to wake up at 4 am for another day's work.

This is how Gomiben's daily life has been for many years now. Every Monday she takes a day off from her work and cleans the house and cooks for the family. On the other days she cannot find such time. She thinks that due to their irregular and very tedious daily work, women of the vending community grow old sooner. She says, "*humhari vendor behnen rozz itna jee tod mehnat karti hain ki unko din ki rest bhi naseeb nahi hoti.....isliye hum log jaldi burhi ho jate hain....kothiyon mein jo log rehte hain unko accha rest milti hai.*" Gomiben also feels that due to the habit of eating junk food, women in her community (and she herself) gain weight and become obese. Once, Gomiben attended a short-term health awareness camp organized by a local NGO in a by-lane near her home.

That camp was an eye-opener for her and after that she started observing many things in her community. She noticed that by the age of 35–40 years, women have menopause. All day long they roam around working hard and sometimes they cannot find a public toilet so many of them have urine infections. Vendors also have the habit of wearing old second-hand clothes. They never buy new clothes unless for an occasion like a wedding or a big festival like Diwali. Vendor women wear old clothes without washing them. Gomiben knows that this also causes infections and she tries to be cautious but many of her counterparts are not aware of this fact. She feels that her fellow women vendors lack awareness about health and hygiene. Another common thing among women vendors is sleep deprivation. They hardly get four hours of sleep every day. This sleep deprivation shows up in their health, habits, behaviour and activities. Women vendors are often very loud and harsh. They get irritated very fast and often pick up fights. She says, "*hum mahilayne itni tension main rehti hain hummesha ki koi doctor agar pariksha kare toh hum sabmen mansik beemari jarur milega.*"

Apart from health hazards, women vendors also face sexual harassment while at work. As they roam alone or in small groups, they are sometimes stalked by unknown men in the evenings. Gomiben herself has had such an experience. A man had been stalking her for days but did not dare touch her. Coincidentally, she went to his home to collect old clothes after which he felt awkward and nervous in front of his family and so he stopped stalking her. She says, "*humme sab ki kahani lag bhag ek jaise he hai, fir bhi hum ummed nahi chodte*" (In our community, most of us go through similar struggles every day but still we do not lose hope). Gomiben is not an exception. There are many like her on the street. Her life experiences are similar to those of many other women making their livelihood on the streets. The everyday life of a street vendor is unique and full of challenges. She not only has to find a way of earning a viable livelihood but the presence of various adverse factors makes it a further challenge for her. Being a woman vendor in a city like Delhi is not a happy situation anymore.

Besides sexual overtures, women like Gomiben also have to deal with other forms of harassment like having to pay illegal 'taxes,' facing social discrimination and invisibility, and her trade and her community being insulted. Early in their lives such women suffer from severe health problems as a result of social, economic and cultural discrimination and are forced to retire from work early. As a consequence, their children get pushed into the same trade and the cycle of poverty, discrimination and being deprived of education continues.

Her invisible skills

Despite a whole gamut of statutory provisions, women's rights are violated every day. For example, take the case of nursing in which Michael (1994) describes many invisible skills which

are of “great value” that need to be recognized. Similarly, there are many invisible skills that street vendors have which also require recognition and visibility. Violence against women, a shrinking public space and the influence of neo-liberalism on public policy is increasing every day. Their visible skills (hard work, negotiating skills and some marketing skills) are visible but their invisible skills comprise of the day-to-day struggle on multiple fronts. They also have to deal with the police, touts, illegal markets, decreasing customers, unfriendly cityscapes and transport facilities which make life extremely difficult and full of challenges for them. The skills needed to deal with these aspects are not only invisible but most of the time are not even considered to be skills.

Business matters for her

As for any entrepreneur, business matters for every street vendor though there are many things which are not under her control. Most street vendors lack money to invest. Further, the prices fixed for their products are very low as a result of which their earnings are very little as compared with their investments. In a city like Delhi commuting is also a huge expense for them. Besides, travelling long distances also means that their products get dirty and also spoilt. Often street vendors have to take loans to buy goods.

A woman who sells *moomphali* (peanuts) every winter in Delhi had to take a loan of Rs 1–2 lakh at an exorbitantly high rate of interest before she became a member of the SEWA cooperative in Sundernagri. Most of the vendors have average outstanding debts of Rs 2–3 lakh. Gomiben’s life-story describes how she had to bear the burden of a loan. But this is something that is quite common in her community with only the amount of loan varying from person to person. Gomiben talked about one of her neighbours who had a loan Rs 5 lakh which she could not repay. She had to sell her one-room house and the whole family found themselves on the road. But still this woman did not lose hope and was ready to start again. Says she, “*Jab tak sharir me mehnat karne ki shakti hai, hum mehnat karenge aur fir se apna ghar kharidenge*” (So long as there is any strength left in our bodies we shall work hard and again buy a house of our own).

Studies also show that on an average vendors pay 100 to 125 per cent interest per annum on their loans. Often, they even have to pay a 10 per cent rate of interest per day! This exorbitantly high rate is a major drain on their incomes. In addition, they also have to pay a charge for being allowed to sell their wares. Some of these charges are ‘legal’ as in daily payments or ‘*tehbazari*’ charged by municipalities, fines for traffic violations or payments to the municipality for releasing confiscated goods. However, most such charges are illegal and take the form of bribes to the police or to municipal officials or to local strongmen (Jhabvala 2000).

Cityscapes and viable spaces

An urban public space is a physical space and it is social relations that determine the use of space within the non-private realms in cities. It is the setting for a panoply of human activities and a fundamental determinant of the character of a town. Urban public space is a key element in the livelihoods of the urban poor, but its importance in development policies for cities is largely ignored (Brown 2006).

In Delhi, urban public spaces have become assets for livelihoods despite every limitation. Thus, urban public space is perceived as a physical asset which is used to sustain the livelihoods of the urban poor. Street vending has become visible and a controversial component of the urban economy and vendors operate their businesses in areas like open streets and pavements which are

not intended for vending per se. We do not find street vendors everywhere. There are specific locations which are suitable for them. The space requires being customer friendly so it has to be a space which people pass often so that the visibility of the vendors increases. Hence, from the point of urban planning, it is important to understand this aspect of their lives. However, it is often seen that such factors are not taken into consideration. Yankson's study of Accra (2000), gives a number of factors which were identified as influencing the choice of sites by operators. Customer attraction was the factor that most influenced site selection. This was followed by availability of access roads and lack of suitable alternative sites. The least important was the plots allocated by the municipal authority. The results of Suharto's study (2004) in the Bandung Metropolitan Region in Indonesia show that although street vendors were widespread in many different places, their locations always reflected their reliance on economic activities either located on, or affected by the street. Dewar and Watson (1990) highlight the sensitivity of market locations to concentrations of pedestrian traffic.

Their needs and demands

The Constitution of India gives equal rights to all its citizens. Right to movement is a fundamental right which is highly contested in the case of street vendors. She is not allowed to do business in spaces where a street vendor can make maximum profits and the spaces made available to her are those where she can do little business. This paradoxical situation makes her living difficult and whenever she moves into her profitable zones she is made an offender. Vendors' demands do not impact the economy of the country as much as a mall or a super market do or a flyover or modern infrastructure does as this attracts big investors in the city. A woman vendor's needs are therefore becoming less important day by day. Says Gomiben, "*Hamare toh hamesha yehi umeed rehti hai ki hamara saman beek jai sahi daam main. Aur humme din raat kamar tod mehnat na karna pade. Hum log yebhi chahte hain ki sarkar hamare taraf dhyan de aur hamare liye yojane banaye aur humme bhi faida de. Hum toh roz kuwan khodte hai aur roz paani nikalte hai....*" (We can only hope that our goods are sold at a good price so that we may not have to do back-breaking work day and night. We also want the government to pay attention to us and implement new plans to benefit us. As it is, we live from hand to mouth; we have to dig a well every day so that we may drink water.)

Their space is not only encroached upon by the police and the state but also by their identity of being 'women'. In most markets, legal and illegal vending spaces are dominated by men vendors. Women vendors thus struggle with multiple identities of being a woman, a street vendor, being poor and a migrant. Yes, they continue to struggle without abandoning hope. As Friere (1973) writes, "Hopelessness and despair are both the consequence and the cause of inaction or immobilism. In limited situations, beyond which lies 'untested feasibility' alone—sometimes perceivable, sometimes not—we find the why of both positions: the hopeful one and the hopeless one." Gomiben is definitely the 'hopeful one'.

Their importance in our lives

There are many reasons to justify the role of street vendors in our daily lives and why they should be given attention as being an integral part of society. Unemployment is a major concern in our country. There are not enough white collar jobs to meet the growing employment demands of the younger generation in the organized sector. In such a situation, vendors along with other workers in the informal sector opt for self-employment. It is near impossible to create enough jobs in the formal sector to fulfil the needs of a 1.2 billion strong population. Therefore, self-

employment needs to be encouraged and such people need to be empowered. Poverty is another big concern. According to the World Bank South Asia Malnutrition Report (2005), almost half (47 per cent) of the Indian children are malnourished; illiteracy in India is one of the highest in the world. Studies also show that as poor people get income security they first attain a minimum level of nutrition and then begin to spend on other necessities like clothing, healthcare, education for the children and housing depending on the urgency of the need. Street vending is a way for poor people to start moving out of poverty. Therefore, encouraging their livelihood would mean empowering a larger number of people not only to come out of poverty, but also to provide important services to others. Street vendors provide fruits and vegetables, fish, flowers, readymade food, clothes, household goods and a wide variety of necessities to people in the cities. They make these goods available at the most convenient places—at the door step, on the way home from office, near the market place, at bus stops. Without them, the monthly expenses of the middle class will go up and survival of the poor will become difficult. However, their contributions are often as invisible as their demands.

What the government promises

The Government of India has finally started paying some attention to the needs and demands of street vendors like Gomiben. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation (MoHUPA) has proposed Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Bill, 2012 which is aimed at regulating street vendors in public spaces and also at protecting their rights. It was introduced in the Lok Sabha in September 2012 as a result of the Supreme Court of India recognizing street vending as a source of livelihood in 2010 and directing MoHUPA to work on a central legislation. Section 3(1) of the bill mentions registration of street vendors (14 years and above) with the town vendor committee which will free them from their everyday struggle for space and the existing licensing system. It states: *“Every person who has completed the age of fourteen years, or as the case may be, the age prescribed by the appropriate Government, and intends to do street vending, may make an application to the Town Vending Committee for registration as a street vendor.”*

Moreover, Section 6(2) (1) states that a certificate of vending referred to in sub-section (1) shall be issued under any of the following categories, namely a stationary vendor; or a mobile vendor; or any other category as may be prescribed. Sections 2 (C) (D) (E) contain provisions for promoting and protecting a natural market, weekly markets and night bazaars where vendors and hawkers can sell their wares. Chapter V 20(1) states that there will be a permanent committee for grievance redressal and transparency and protection of vendors from confiscation of their goods and forced eviction by authorities (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending Rules, 2012).

What this bill promises is relevant and important for the lives of many like Gomiben. First and foremost, the bill recognizes vendors as workers in the labour force. Women like Gomiben will now get an identity and legitimation. The bill also promises provision of proper spaces where vendors/ hawkers can sell their goods. This will cut down on the time and energy that they have to invest in their work. A town vending committee for vendors means they will be organized and their issues will be noticed by the appropriate authorities. This will also be rid of emergency evacuations by authorities as also the unwanted and harsh treatment from the police. This will help reduce much of the chaos in their lives.

Concluding remarks

It is a pity that even after 65 years of independence, India has not implemented any specific act for street vendors. They have been struggling for long and their issues have not been addressed sincerely. Meanwhile, a few voluntary organizations have been trying to raise their voices on behalf of women street vendors. For example, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) for women workers in the informal economy including women street vendors has been working for four decades and the National Association for Street Vendors of India (NASVI) has been working for street vendors for a decade. Such organizations should be promoted by the government and a concrete plan for street vendors needs be implemented. Attempts have also been made for getting a central law and a board for street vendors. The bill now is a ray of hope for Gomiben and millions of others like her.

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