Hawking on the lines: Tales of the Railway Hawkers and their Everydays

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Abstract: Hawking is a profession of the informal sector. It takes place in different forms. From pavement to a moving local train, hawking is a way of livelihood to many. Their everyday is patterned, routinized and bound by time and space. But their work is different in the sense that it is lived by both them and the passengers. The essence of their ‘social’ world is diffused in the sense that they are sellers of products of low price with very less capital. This article will focus on the life-world of hawkers in train running between Howrah and Bandel. This is a part of the main line of Eastern Division of Indian Railways. The researcher has undertaken an ethnographic research on hawkers of this section. The article will focus on how the hawkers create a life-world distinct and diffused, ordered yet haphazard. The peculiarity of this life-world is that the researcher is also part of it.

Keywords: Hawkers in Indian railway, Hawking, Life-world, Everyday interaction, Ethnography, Men and Women Hawkers.

Introduction

I never thought that I will write on them. Their presence had many a times disappointed me (it still does some time)! I am sitting at a platform of a railway station between Howrah junction and Burdwan. It is a chilly morning and is rather dark. I was struggling to keep myself warm in the wintry morning. I am waiting for a train to take me home. The lights in the station are still glowing; time at the clock in the station says it is 3.57 a.m. It is still eight minutes to wait for the train to arrive. The fraction in time is very important for trains. All can be disrupted in a fraction! The parallel lines of the train lay in front of me. The deep red fluorescent lamps at the two ends of the platform seem to delay the time of the trains by their sheer existence. Both the up and the down platforms were empty and bare. I looked at the
lines again. These are the lines that help people to take them to so distant places. These are the two lines that remain, they may be divided at some point, at others may join others but nevertheless remain parallel to each other. Though the lines run analogous they also connect to maintain the link or are the link of a continuum. At this hour a train might arrive with some passengers, where I will be an addition, some of the passengers might also board the train or get down but all of this will occur at a moment in the long time-frame of the train reaching between two stations in a single time-frame. Any activities or actions that take place here are subsumed under the time-frame at a particular space. The train or its carriages will be the immediate space where interactions, relations will start and continue. The interaction may seem trivial or insignificant but those will surely be patterned and routinized. This will occur every day. This journey on a new space for interaction started on 16th April 1853 under the Viceroyship of Lord Dalhousie. The first train to run in India was between Bori Bandar and Thane of Bombay residency. It was the first passenger train with fourteen carriages. It travelled thirty-four kilometres with four hundred passengers (Indian Railways, Annual Report 2020). The first train from Howrah started in 1854, 15 August, marking the first in Eastern India. The space for a new interaction to develop started one hundred and sixty-six years ago (ibid).

The train arrives. It brings in a wintry chill with it. I caught hold of the steel rod and boarded the train. Another man boarded the train with me. He had a monkey cap on his head to avoid the chill, a bag in hand, a cloth wrapped on his full-sleeve shirt, trousers and a pair of slippers to stay away from being barefoot. The doors of the local trains are always kept open. So, the winter chill did not spare us. I took a seat opposite to the way of the wind. I thought to myself that it was the best place to avoid the cold. The man also sat beside me and smiled in a way to show that it was his place and I had taken it away from him. I apologetically asked if he wanted to sit in my place. “Oh no!” he replied, “…actually I sit in this place every day, it is okay that you sit for today”. I asked him where he is going. He replied, “Howrah and from there I will take a different route”. I asked whether it is the time he boards a train every day, to which he replied, “Yes, I do not have holidays Dada. It is a holiday for me only if I take one” he smiled back. “I am a hawker”, he said, “I sell biscuits in trains in the South Eastern division. I have a flask full of hot tea in my bag. I have fixed customers between Kharagpur and Howrah. The flasks will be empty after I reach Howrah. I will return home once they are empty”.

The Line that was laid in 1854 has grown far and wide, there has been modernization too. The trains take us from one station to another. It is the only means for many to reach their destinations. It is also the space where many people have found their bread and butter. To the hawkers the train is not only a means to reach destinations but it is also a means to survive hardships collectively. The branch of Indian Railways on which I am writing this essay is part of Eastern Railway, the Main line running between Howrah and Bandel. The number of hawkers who work in this division is more than ten thousand. They work from morning till the last local train finishes its journey. They sip their brew and talk about their markets with each other at the time they start their business of selling petty goods. “…we have to move out of our homes in every kind of weather, be it rainy, summer or winter” said Manas Das, arranging his mango papads. “…investments have all gone with the blood tests I had to do for my wife”, he continued, “…if I do not sale an extra amount of two hundred rupees each day it will be difficult for me!” …there are people here who work like us lends us money with an interest of four percent. I have to repay my loans as early as possible. The doctor has asked to give her fruits too. Where will I get the money/ so I take fruits from other hawkers. We do not charge much from each other and that a principle we follow. If we cannot understand each other’s problem then it will be hard on our survival. Our relationship with passengers has changed. Before we could pass on the bag of any passenger who was unable to enter a carriage or any passenger would take things of their choice from our bag and pay later. The new generation of passengers of young age do not see us in the same light. We have intimate relationships with many of their uncles. Our relation with them extends beyond simple seller and buyer. They have always extended their hand to us in helping us with doctors’ appointments, medicines at low cost etc. But there are few new salesmen working here who have damaged our reputation with their bad behaviour and misdeeds. The other day a passenger fell off from a carriage because of a fall-out between two hawkers. We sometimes have to carry the fruits of their transgressions. Actually, the Railway Police Force (R. P. F.) comes after us. I could not come for work for two consecutive days. We had to negotiate with them and then it was feasible for us to work again”. He stopped there as train had entered the station. It is a risk they enter every day. They run or fall off a moving train whenever such chase by the police takes place. I bid him farewell and started to walk down the platform. A train stops at a platform for thirty to forty seconds. It is within this time that passenger board and get down, hawkers move from one compartment to the next. They start off their daily interaction as soon as they enter a compartment.
Many everydays: Different, dynamic and patterned

Twenty years ago, I called him ‘Kaka’ (Uncle). Today after many years, I saw him again. He came down from a local train to the platform where I was seated, waiting for a train to reach my destination. He held a bundle of packaged nuts, coughing. His chest panting for breath was looking frail in his uncut grey beard, unbuttoned shirt torn in places with holes from cigarette or bidi flames. His Hawai chappal bearing the proof of wear and tear with visible stitches, he soon recognized me and came forward. But as I was not a daily passenger now, found a loss of words on how to call him by the same old name, ‘Kaka’. His smile and recognition assured me of a tête-à-tête. ‘You have grown in size!’ he smiled at me, to which I replied and told him about my thoughts on his recognition after a long gap. He said, ‘you were skeptical because of my looks, aren’t you? I have two daughters and two sons, daughters are married, sons have separated and live by themselves, it is only us now— wife (Mrs.) and me’. His utterance of an English synonym for his wife kept me wondering. Before I could ask him, he answered, ‘I talk in English now! Especially when I work, the young ones often call me “Uncle, give us a packet of nuts, what is the price? Rupees five isn’t it?”’, his smile broadened. He has been working on the local train, selling different products at different times for forty-five years. He continued, ‘I have sold so many items these years, incense sticks, handkerchiefs, hair-clips, socks, what not! Life is full of tension to us…have been working dawn to dusk to meet all ends…from paying tuition fees for children to buying medicines for wife. ‘Why did you come to this way of earning livelihood then, I asked?’ He went on ‘…Look I have been working (hawking) all these years but never have been involved in any controversies with passengers. Those who have started work now often get intimidated by the passengers (buyers). When everyone is racing for a livelihood it is obvious that there will be situations of conflict. But we have to be conscious of it. We work in shifts. I work usually in the afternoons the morning goes away in helping with household chores…to keep up with the time-kaller jol…your Kakima is sick for the last five years…visits to a doctor is not helping her in any way…sons do not live with us so I am the only one to help her. Then I sit to arrange the goods, packet the nuts after bringing them from the mahajan and go out for regular job every day. A plethora of questions come up to my mind. ‘How do you select the carriage?’ I asked. ‘at first, I would guess, my experience later taught me that my earnings would be better if I left three from the first…worked for two stations in between and would get down after a fair sale. Usually have
some tea and boarded another train to sale my stuff to another set of passengers’.

There is a link between sociological theories and methodological orientation. If we hold that sociology is what we do in every-day life and that is its main focus, then we are inclined to take over from the methodological orientations popularized by the anthropologist. This is so because our daily life is visible and therefore observable. We might think what is ‘common’ in such trivial, relatively and mutually discrete phenomenon that has challenged the dominant macro-sociological theorizing? Such trivial yet significant perspective has in fact bottled up sociological analysis of the ‘social’—socio-economic structural analysis, social structure, analyses of social development to the analysis of the ‘social’ in the miniscule boundary of the every-day. It has matured into the analysis of our daily life, routine life, every-day emotions, experience, conflicts, cooperation, struggles, love and hate. We cannot analyze this mundane routine, timed behavior by standing at a distance. It has to be lived, experienced, shared and believed. We need to analyze it from the different aspects of social interaction keeping in mind the everyday context in which it takes place. The sociological understanding and study of an abstract social structure is always not possible without the understanding of the in-depth dynamism of the daily life. At the same time the awareness of the micro-structural elements of our daily life remain active. We are situated at the juncture of the continuous flow of every-day life and the awareness of the abstract social structure we believe to be omnipresent by normative statements. Our social existence is neither limited by the structure and its abstract analysis nor is it bounded within our daily wants and responses. It means that our social existence is never stagnant. It is continuous and, in a flux, because we cannot call it ‘life’ if our social existence comes to a standstill. Our social existence is always a dynamic process. It should not be assumed that our existence is dynamic and processual only because we do routine jobs every day! It is dynamic also because it is the trajectory of long-term change. Our everyday is constructed through the most trivial, relatively unimportant ideas and activities. Kaka was still sitting beside me, murmuring under his breath. He might be thinking of his job that day! There are quite a number of people like him who commute every-day to sell their products to passengers on the local train. These hawkers are different people but a category to a sociologist. As a category of people united by the nature of their profession they struggle, calculate their loss and gain after each trip constitute a discourse on hawking in trains. All of them have an existence that is so different from each other yet so common. The dynamism of their wants and desires, happiness and
loss, emotions and rationality all form an innate motivation for social action. The opportunities that the customers of Kaka and many others give form the motivation for them to overcome any crisis (of a day) and motivation for them to go to work the next morning. So when I ask him ‘how was your marketing today?’ he reiterates by saying, ‘it was my first train, let me see what future holds for me!’ what I mean to state is that the process by which hawkers like him sell their products and the process by which their customers have bought them both have made him (or others like him) a hawker. The dynamism of the relationship between an individual and the social context is the context of the daily life in which a hawker exists. It comprises of calculations, love, hate, conflict and cooperation of a hawker and his customers.

This daily life is framed within time. A particular train at a particular time, a particular carriage for a particular hawker is time-bound. Space and time both are circumscribed by the clock. My conversations with him revealed more about this. The context (social existence of this hawker) is such that he does not board the next train if he cannot board his train of choice on time. Dalim had been working for more than thirty years. I asked him what made him choose this profession when opportunities were better compared to the present. ‘Did not have decent education, my father being poor could not pay for my tuition fees and asked me to work. I started to work at the age of twelve and give a portion of my earning to the family. I was very happy to leave school but now I understand it would have been better if I completed at least secondary education. But I love my profession…it is the work that helps my family to survive.’ I asked if this was the type of products, he sold from the first. ‘…no…I started with selling nuts but realized that there was fair amount of competition in selling such a product and quickly switched over to the selling of fruits. That too was a consumable product and was in tension of a loss…you know it is hard for a hawker to survive a loss…I have less strength now and switched to sale of ornaments.’ My silent ear to Dalim perhaps invokes a support and he continues…’there is competition in this profession. The passengers particularly those who commute daily readily recognize our voice and understands what kind of products we sale. The voice in which I am talking to you is my real voice but I change my voice, modulate, to make it more attractive to the passenger. This is harmful for my throat and my voice so I gargle with warm water as I return home. I grew enthusiastic to a hawker’s voice and realized what Dalim meant. The voice of a hawker can be heard in a train carriage from far. The pitch of the voice is high and all have different styles peculiar to an individual. Everyone has a different technique of presenting their product.
Body is very important in daily life. The *everydays* of each person revolve around their bodies. The level of strength and endurance, weakness, might and limitation give each of us our own share of expression of our bodily capacities. We act with all this in a particular situation at a particular time and at a particular context. The context has its own features. There are some intrinsic characteristics of our daily lives which are common and it is beyond our capacity to identify those. The common is that which is natural. There is also some theatrical element in our daily lives, a style that has to be adopted and internalized. So Dalim and Kaka both and others like them situate their everyday in the context of a train. Here they not only sale their product but use the space to introduce the product to the prospective customers, sometime initiate a dialogue with them and draw them towards the purchase of the product. Each sell of a product is episodic but the duration varies from the nature of the product and the style the seller adopts.

‘Train is our space where we sell our products. We do not like to be static or bound by a space. Our space renders mobility as the key to our sale’ said Rabi. ‘It is also challenging to sell products to different customers at the same space at the same time. But it has its risks too. But we like to avoid crowd. It is always difficult to sale products in a crowded space. Many passengers have become known to us. They are not mere acquaintances now. Many inquire about our children too. I was invited once to a wedding of a passenger. It was an invitation for my family but I took only my son with me as I did not want my wife to be identified as a “hawker’s wife”. But I respect my profession. It is through this that I am able to sustain my family.’ The interactions and the relationships that develop with the passengers are often the seeds of a collective. This collective is bound by a journey from one destination to another where both parties have different interests. Each one looks out for a space within their reach, gather at a particular time and disperse. The compartment of a train is the spatial context where such interactions take place, mutual exchange occurs. It is also a space which is the possible output of a long bureaucratic system, a historical evolution of railway connections, colonial hangovers, state security, and surveillance of a policing system. ‘…sometimes the Railway Police Force (RPF) initiates activities against many of us…we run…lose some of our belongings in the fallout’. Their everydays are days of struggles not only to meet both ends but also to survive a system of unfair and corrupt policing. The struggle concerning power is another important aspect of the study on ‘everyday’. When I started off with this study and also in my earlier days as daily commuter on local trains, I have seen a deep friendship of the hawkers with the passengers. They could easily be identified as an
interacting group. They have their self-motivated interests but also work together, take risks and maintain friendly interactions. They answer to the queries of the passengers, give them information, share, and trust each other. There are stories of mistrust and abuse too. The hawkers in a train not only perform but there is a human face embedded in their daily routine job of salesmanship. I have seen a hawker helping a passenger with glucose-drinking water and a fan in the summer, warn a passenger on the possible dangers of talking into a cell phone by the window. Dalim said, ‘we need to be alert at the time child commuters go to their schools and return.

Malati, a woman hawker in the evening echoed a similar concern. To her this profession helps her to meet all ends but there are more disadvantages than the opposite. To her a female body in such a space is the most important disadvantage. ‘…the passengers who keep on standing at the gate of a compartment are mostly very abusive, they take advantage of a female body. But we need to get inside the train to work….sometimes we need to shout at them. Moreover, the male passengers often do not like to buy things from us as they fear being victims of taunt and ridicule of their men friends. Moreover, women hawkers face being labeled as “bad woman” very easily. Therefore, we need to be alert and conscious to this too. It is never an issue with the men hawkers. Sometimes passengers do not trust women hawkers to be able to compete equally with men in their capacity to sell same kind of products in a crowded train, so most women hawkers come later in the afternoon to work when train s are comparatively less crowded. Another disadvantage that women hawkers face is their problem in changing from one compartment to another in a moving train…. women hawkers need to dress-up too. I have seen men hawkers to be able to sale goods even in torn shirts but if we come in such dresses passengers do not like to listen’. Her wants and desires and the working conditions do not match. She wants to equal her men counter-parts but she cannot. At the same time, I could understand the experiences of a man and a woman are different. This difference in their perception and experience is also routinized, continuous and important in understanding the unorganized scattered daily life of the hawkers.

It is spontaneity which is one of the other features of our every day. This naturalness is often expressed through language. The choice of words, use of language is significant ways in which a hawker accomplishes his or her salesmanship with proficiency. The knack with which a hawker does this is a creative aspect of their salesmanship. They fulfill their targets, sale their products, make profit but with a smile. To fulfill such targets, they
often take risks. Milan talked about such risks. He had to realize a target in order to buy gifts for a wedding. He missed the station where he had to get down. The R. P. F. caught hold of him for travelling extra 40 miles than for what he had a license. The passengers took my side and convinced the police personnel. The fine charged was reduced. In such circumstances Milan quoted that many run down the track to avoid payment of fine and probable harassment.

I sit on a bench in an unknown platform...there is a kadam tree beside the bench. After a few minutes some hawkers come under the tree to rest on the cemented pulpit. All are there with their products for sale (maal), discussing something. I assumed they were waiting for someone. I found someone sleeping using the trunk of the tree as a prop. They called her by the name Jhulan. She picked a small Tiffin box from her bag. It was full of muri and desiccated coconut. They shared the food on a piece of newspaper spread over the pulpit. Completed they stated off their own journeys throwing the paper in the dustbin. One among them said it is the practice for them for the last ten to fifteen years. There is a definite station where they find time to sit for lunch too. The little time they have in between trains is utilized by friends in this way.

Santosh said, ‘as I work in the evenings I cannot talk much. People buy things in their way home. The compartment of the train becomes a market place in the evening. This is not a big market…a small one which caters to the accidentally forgotten items. We supply those items that are important for daily living but are very insignificant in the context of large bills. We maintain our daily bread by selling these items to the customers. We are not in a position to buy things that are expensive. There is a lot of bargaining in the train. There is also a culture of lending money among hawkers. Palash had bought a smart phone with the money he took on loan. He keeps it at home for his wife and children to use. He keeps a simple mobile phone instead of the expensive set. He said, ‘smart phone is not a necessity but it is an item of interest to his wife and children. They do not understand everything of the mobile set but still want or desire it. Sometimes they desire and want something which is out of my reach but I try my best to get them the things they want. It is then that I need to take loan. There is one boy who sell newspaper. He buys tickets for lottery and spend at least ten to twelve thousand on it per month. He earns two thousand and fifty every month but all of the money he earns is spend on repayment. There are different people who desire different things. I wonder what else describe their life. Is it important because it is different? The answers loom large.
Why the search for the difference and the pattern?

Sociology started to take shape and focus on social structure, social system, social institution, industrialization, urbanization, social relationship, in short on the macro aspect of understanding society and the social environment in which we live. In the pursuit of the macro-social analysis and causal inferences the study of the everydays and how these days brought about the necessary pattern and diversity seemed a trivial issue though sociology never lost the significance of daily practices. Emile Durkheim’s division of labour (1997 [1893]), religious life (1965 [1912]), and anomie (1951 [1897]) had discussions on how family and community impacted everyday life. Karl Marx (1975 [1844]) and 1969 [1848]) highlighted how the capitalist system killed the human spirit and helped in the decay of community and family every day. Talcott Parsons (1949) the progenitor of grand theory showed how individuals take decisions performing their social roles and create the social structure. Later on, it was through the works of Max Weber, George Mead, Levi-Strauss and others that the study of the micro level reality started to take shape. Simmel was a forerunner of this kind of sociology. With it ushered a turn in methodological perspective to how to look into such realities so close yet not under any scrutiny.

In sociology the study of the everyday was not a focused area for exploration unless Garfinkel tried to bring out how our every day is managed, organized and become the ‘taken for granted’ context in which we live our lives. Each one of us lives every day. Our everydays are marred with the mundane, routinized, solemn, grim, repetitiveness. Still it is the everydays that are reflection of the structure or the system; the system or the structure is maintained through our everyday struggles, works, joys of living and dreams. Yet we do not consider these everydays of any worth in our daily habit, duties and struggles. Our existence is counted in our years not in moments that in summation are our everydays adding of each day in our lives. Unless it has been lived or discovered under the scrutinized observation of a researcher that these become a base for the understanding of a series of life-experiences. Hawking is one such.

A hawker is a vendor of merchandisethat can be easily transported; the term is roughly synonymous with peddler. In most places where the term is used, a hawker sells inexpensive items, handicrafts or food items. Whether stationary or mobile, hawkers often advertise by loud street cries or chants, and conduct banter with customers, so to attract attention and enhance sales. When accompanied by a demonstration and/or detailed explanation of the product, the hawker is sometimes referred to as a demonstrator or
pitchman (Mazumdar and Ghosh 2017). The railways often termed as the ‘lifeline of the nation’ directly provides a means of living to many people and also offers jobs to many people of the country irrespective of their cast, creed and religion. It is widely believed that the unorganized sector in India suffers from a low productivity syndrome, compared to the formal and organized sector. The prominent features of the sector are lower real wages and poor working / living conditions.

A lot of the goods sold by train hawkers, such as moulded plastic goods and household goods, beauty products and cosmetics, homemade sweets, snacks, jewellery, stationery are manufactured in small scale or home-based industries. These manufacturers cannot afford to retail their products through expensive distribution channels of the formal sector. In this way they provide a valuable service by helping sustain employment in these industries. Thus, they are a vital link between producers and consumers making a valuable contribution to the economy. The business of hawking evolved from the past and holds existence from primitive times itself. We have encountered this form of unorganized business in different timelines and in different forms. It can date from the large markets of rural India to street-side salesmen who sell their products the same way a railway hawker might do.12 But what makes the railway hawkers significant is their degree of freedom in mobility; he can travel various places to reach his customers which the other traders may not be able to with their collection of commodities. Street hawkers are particularly vulnerable to efforts to regulate and transform urban space because they tend to work in strategic locations with a high volume of pedestrian traffic. In many instances, these are the very places where the authorities seek to impose and showcase a ‘world-class’ urban vision, which involves the exclusion of ‘undesirable’ users such as street dwellers and hawkers (Fadaee and Schindler 2017).

The study of the everyday of hawkers is fundamentally vibrant. It is dynamic not only because it is unremitting and uninterrupted but also because it gives us a vision of productive social transformations. The actors here are at the one hand are negotiators with limited resources and bargaining power and on the other are social agents to exploit and forego opportunities. These are the people who are acting with limitations; carry the practices of their predecessors and also carefully creating a path of their own for the future generations. Their struggles and hardships and also their resilience to fight make them really real persons.
Notes

1. Dada is a term called to denote elder brother

2. Kharagpur Railway station is an operative station in the South Eastern division of Indian Railways. It was opened in 1898-99 (See Wikipedia.org for details).

3. Howrah Railway station is the oldest and largest railway complex in India, built in 185 (See Wikipedia.org for details).

4. Bandel is a junction station of Kolkata Suburban tracks in India. It is situated on the Howrah-Bandel-Bardhaman line in Hooghly district. It is also connected to Sealdah division by Bandel-Naihati line (See Wikipedia.org for details).

5. Mango papads are Indian fruit leather made of mango pulp. It is sweet and is available in different varieties.

6. Bidi is a local version of cigarette made out of leaf and tobacco, lower in price and commonly consumed by people/smokers.

7. Chappal is the Bangla term for sandals. Hawai is a form of sandals made of rubber, lower in price to leather sandals. Hawai is a brand name.

8. This is a usual dialect which indicates water supply commissioned by urban administration. It has a scheduled time-frame so the term includes Time-Kol (tap)-jol (water).

9. Kakima is a term used for the wife of Kaka (Pateranl Uncle).

10. It is a term used for broker and money-lender.

11. Puffed rice

12. In the colonial archive of Calcutta, the term ‘hawker’ appears along with other similar terms such as pavement seller, footpath seller, and pheriwal (peddler, or costermonger; whether stationary or mobile) at least since the late nineteenth century. But even in the 1970s, ‘hawker’, or even pheriwal (pheriwal for female vendor), was not a common term for a trader, whether on the footpath or itinerant; rather, they were popularly known for their trade. Thus, a fruit seller was called a phalwala (phal means fruit); one who sold utensils was called a basanwala (basan means...
utensils). In Calcutta’s everyday language of conversation, ‘hawker’ emerged only after partition (1947), when the government of West Bengal initiated economic rehabilitation projects for refugees by building a number of ‘refugee hawker corners’ in the city. These retail corners, which fuelled much of the expansion in the retail trade in refugee-dominated areas, were regulated through the Markets Regulation Act, and shop owners were given a trade license, but retained their specific history in their names (for example, Kalighat Refugee Hawkers Corner). See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hawkers_in_Kolkata retrieved 30 March 2020, 2 April 2020.

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