

Street Vendors in Asia: A Review

This paper attempts to examine recent research done on street vendors in Asia with the aim of assessing the magnitude of street vending in different countries and the composition of the vendors. Further, it collates information on the extent of unionisation of the vendors and other organisations, such as non-government organisations (NGOs), self-help organisations (SHOs), advocacy groups, etc, that work for their welfare.

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Lack of gainful employment coupled with poverty in rural areas has pushed people out of their villages in search of a better existence in the cities. These migrants do not possess the skills or the education to enable them to find better paid, secure employment in the formal sector and they have to settle for work in the informal sector. There is another section of the population in these countries which is forced to join the informal sector. They are workers who were earlier employed in the formal sector. They lost their jobs because of closures, down-sizing or mergers in the industries they worked in and they or their family members had to seek low-paid work in the informal sector in order to survive. The first category, namely low skilled rural migrants, exist in all countries of Asia but they are more prevalent in the poorer countries such as India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Cambodia and Vietnam. These countries did not have a strong industrial base and in the past too, the urban workforce was engaged mainly in the informal sector.

The second category, namely, workers who were earlier in the formal sector, exists in countries such as Philippines, South Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and India. The closure of several industries due to a variety of reasons – outsourcing of work to the informal sector, mergers of some of the corporations, downsizing of the production units, etc – has resulted in large scale unemployment in these countries. In most cases, the informal sector has absorbed these people. In fact it can be observed that even manufacturing units in the informal sector have grown faster than the units in the formal sector. For example, in India, according to the government's pre-budget *Economic Survey for 2004-05*, the total workforce in the formal sector is around 27 million while the small-scale industries provide employment to 28 million workers. The *Survey* notes that employment in this sector grew from 24 million in 2000-01 to 28 million in 2004-05 whereas employment in the formal sector is stagnant at 27 million since 1991. Around half of those employed in the formal sector are in white-collar jobs, hence workers in the small-scale sector outnumber blue-collar workers in the formal sector.

The activities in the informal sector can be categorised into two sections – the self-employed and casual (non-permanent) labour. A major section of the self-employed work as street vendors. The rise in the number of street vendors is largely due to the lack of employment in other sectors but it is also directly linked to the expansion of the informal sector in these countries.

Growth of Street Vending

A street vendor is broadly defined as a person who offers goods for sale to the public without having a permanent built-up structure from which to sell. Street vendors may be stationary in the sense

that they occupy space on the pavements or other public/private spaces or, they may be mobile in the sense they move from place to place by carrying their wares on push carts or in baskets on their heads. In this essay, the term 'street vendor' includes stationary as well as mobile vendors and it incorporates all other local/region specific terms used to describe them. In this study, the terms 'street vendor' and 'hawker' have the same meaning and they are often interchanged.

There is a substantial increase in the number of street vendors in the major Asian cities. In India, the National Policy for Urban Street Vendors/Hawkers notes that street vendors constitute approximately 2 per cent of the population of a metropolis. The total number of street vendors in the country is estimated at around 10 million. This number is likely to increase even further. The reports from the Asian countries show that there was a jump in the number of street vendors after the financial crisis of 1998. This crisis had affected the Asian Tigers the most and one does find that there was a sharp rise in street vendors in Thailand, Singapore and Philippines. Thus we can see that many of the workers who lose their jobs in the formal sector take to street vending as an option that allows them to make a living.

At the same time it should be noted that street vending survives not merely because it is an important source of employment but also because of the services it provides to the urban population. For the urban poor, street vendors provide goods, including food, at low prices. Hence we find that one section of the urban poor, namely, street vendors, subsidises the existence of the other sections of the urban poor by providing them cheap goods, including food. Middle-income groups too benefit from street vending because of the affordable prices offered. These aspects are unfortunately ignored by the Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) and the police because more often than not, street vending is considered an illegal activity and street vendors are treated as criminals. In fact the studies and reports quoted in this study show that in almost all the Asian countries, street vendors have no legal status to conduct their business and they are constantly harassed by the authorities. Yet they are popular because they provide the urban population with much needed services that neither the municipalities nor the larger retailing outlets can provide. In the following sections we shall discuss the status of street vendors based on reports and studies conducted in the different countries.

The first step in the data collection was to try and identify the existing studies. I had come across a few studies while participating in seminars. I wrote to the authors and asked them if they had any further contacts with other researchers. Unfortunately, this yielded hardly any results. The few

researchers who had studied street vending were unable to put me in touch with others because there is hardly any academic research done on this issue. I could get some leads but in most cases I got no response from them.

The next step was to contact the trade unions and NGOs working for street vendors. National Alliance of Street Vendors of India (NASVI) had organised a conference on street vendors in Asia for Streetnet (an international network on street vendors) in 2002. The list of participants was a fairly impressive I tried contacting the organisations in the various countries, but here too I was not very successful. I was able to make contacts with some research institutes and NGOs in some of the countries. My main source of information was through the websites. I was able to access some documents and studies from different websites. The local newspaper reports contained information on the activities of street vendors and the attitudes of the authorities (government, police and ULBs). After exploring all possible sources, one can conclude that though street vending is expanding rapidly, there is hardly any significant research on this issue that is easily accessible. There is an urgent need to encourage more research on this important segment of the urban informal sector.

In the following sections, we shall summarise the data we have on the different countries. In the concluding section we shall attempt to synthesise the studies and information discussed in the earlier sections with a view to compare the situation in these countries. We shall also delineate the areas for further research.

Country Studies

Bangladesh

The number of street vendors in Bangladesh is large. Dhaka is the capital of Bangladesh and also its largest city. According to the Dhaka City Corporation there are around 90,000 street vendors in the city.¹ They operate mainly in Motijheel, Baitul Mukarram, Gulistan, Shahbagh and New Market Areas. Street vending is considered an illegal trade and the street vendors face constant harassment from the authorities. The vendors have to pay a sizeable part of their income as bribes in order to keep plying their trade. According to one report,² vendors in the New Market area pay Tk 2,00,000 a month to a gang that shares the collection with the law-enforcement agency. Each vendor in this area pays around Tk 200 a month to run their business. In other areas such as Baitul Mukarram, GPO and Purana Paltan vendors pay the police Tk 5 daily to avoid harassment.

According to the Bangladeshi delegates who had attended the Asian Regional Workshop on Street Vendors held on February 10-12, 2002 in Bodh Gaya, India,³ the street vendors of Bangladesh were more vulnerable than those in the neighbouring countries due to poverty, lack of space for vending and lack of awareness about their rights. The positive aspect is that there is a fair level of unionisation among them. There are several unions working among street vendors. The most important is the Bangladesh Hawkers' Federation as it is linked to the trade union federation of the ruling Bangladesh National Party. The federation has been negotiating with the government for a policy on street vendors. The first step towards this direction is of forging alliances with other trade unions of street vendors so that a national alliance emerges. This can in turn pressurise the government to take up the issue of a national policy for street vendors. However till such a consensus emerges, the street vendors in Bangladesh will

continue to be regarded as illegal traders and will continue to be harassed by the authorities.

Political parties in Bangladesh continue to render lip service to street vendors, without doing anything concrete to improve their insecurity. For example, a news item in a popular daily in Dhaka newspaper had the following headline: "Huda assures hawkers to protect their rights".⁴ The report noted that while addressing a rally organised by Bangladesh Hawkers' Federation at Dhaka, barrister Nazmul Huda, communications minister, assured hawkers that he would provide them all support to protect their rights and continue their profession in the city. He added that the government is 'pledge bound' to protect the human rights of the citizens. After these statements, the minister launched an attack on the opposition saying that they wanted to disrupt the development efforts of the ruling party and the people (hawkers) should ensure that these people are not voted into power. It hence appears that the hawkers were brought there mainly to support government policies and not for any concrete legal benefits. This approach is not unique to Bangladesh alone. In most countries where the number of street vendors is large, the ruling parties mobilise them for their political purposes. Due to their insecurity, street vendors tend to flock to these parties for protection. These parties use street vendors for their political gains, though the vendors themselves do not get any tangible benefits from this alliance.

Food Vendors

Food vendors are an important feature in the cities of Bangladesh. A paper by Qazi Saif Uddin Ahmad, social welfare and cultural officer of Dhaka City Corporation⁵ provides interesting information on these vendors. He notes that the street food industry provides employment to women and migrants with low educational background. The prices of street food are low and the urban poor benefit from this. Day labourers, rickshaw pullers, migrants from rural areas and the homeless depend on street food vendors for their nutrition. However, because of poor hygiene people often fall ill after eating street food. They are mainly victims of water borne diseases.

Ahmad feels that there must be cooperation between the municipalities and the police for proper management of street food vending. He suggests that municipalities can formulate rules and regulations for the management of street food vending, but these need to be enforced by the police. Hence the need for co-operation between the two authorities. How far this is feasible is anyone's guess. It is the experience in India that such rules only help increase rent-seeking among corrupt officials. They may not help in improving hygiene.

A study conducted by the Intermediate Technology Development Group⁶ on food vendors in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka notes that as street vendors are in the informal sector, there is no systematic documentation of the number of street food vendors. Observations indicate that there are a substantive number of food vendors in the urban areas. Their ages range between 25 and 60 years with a majority being in the age group of 30-40 years. The study recorded the employment history of the food vendors and found that their previous involvement in several urban-based, irregular and low-paid activities that required hard manual labour pushed them into the street food business. These vendors do not always make much profit and they tend to move from one place to another to get better markets. The contribution of women to this trade is significant. Though women do not

constitute a major section of food vendors in Dhaka, the male vendors depend on the women in their household for preparing the items for sale.

The study notes that street food effectively meets the requirements of a large section of the economically active urban population. At the same time the vendors are frequently victimised by the police, public health institutions, local government authorities etc. They are also denied institutional credit facilities that could help them increase their income. They have to rely exclusively on social networks for running their business.

Sri Lanka

Street vendors in Sri Lanka appear to be in a slightly better position than their counterparts in Bangladesh and India. Street vending in most urban areas is not totally illegal and vendors can ply their trade on the pavements by paying a daily tax to the municipal council. On closer look we find that their fate is no different from street vendors in other countries. Despite gaining some legal recognition, vendors are evicted if the municipal council feels that they cause problems to the general public. In most cases evicted vendors are not provided alternate sites. The Sri Lankan delegates who participated in the 2002 Asian Regional Workshop of Streetnet reported that not only did the street vendors face evictions, the municipal authorities burn their stalls during these drives.

In its report of July 23, 2002, Sevanatha, an NGO working for the empowerment of street vendors in Colombo, notes that "the street hawkers of Colombo have had their livelihoods threatened by the Colombo City planners' attempts to cleanse the city streets of the informal sector." These planners "keep to the outdated western concept that pavements are to be clear and clean for pedestrians whereas in the west and many Asian cities planners have realised the benefits of providing space for pavement sellers and maintaining a lively inner city culture." Hence though street vendors have some recognition by the municipality as they pay taxes, this does not necessarily provide them the security to carry out their trades. In most cases, provision of alternative space depends largely on how strongly their union can press for this demand.

The delegates who participated in the above mentioned workshop, stated that it was possible to influence government policy through trade unions of street vendors. It was through their pressure that the government agreed to accommodate street vendors in the World Market: Day and Night Bazaar. These vendors pay taxes to the municipality. The goods sold by street vendors were cheaper than those offered by the big stores.

According to Sevanatha, there are 8,000 to 10,000 street vendors in Colombo and most of them are located in the formal city centres. They are from urban poor settlements and street vending is the only source of employment for these families. Women and children play active roles in this profession. The main problem facing street vendors is lack of security in their livelihood and lack of access to credit.

Food Vendors

The above figures on street vendors do not include street food vendors, who form a large and significant part of the urban population. The project on food vendors conducted by Intermediate Technology Development Group, notes that the number of food vendors in Colombo is fairly large and is increasing because

of the needs of the customers. "The food is relatively cheap and readily available. It is sometimes brought to the doorstep of the customers and sold on credit as done by the vendors operating at Manning Market in Colombo."⁷

The income of food vendors is higher than that of other vendors. According to a report, "the average daily income of a street food vendor is around Sri Lankan (SL) Rs 1,250 while the average daily profit generated...is approximately SL Rs 575. Most street food vendors operate for an average of 25 days a month. This means that they are able to generate a monthly average income of SL Rs 31,250 and an average profit of SL Rs 14,375. In comparison, the monthly income in urban Sri Lanka is SL Rs 23,436 and the national monthly household income is SL Rs 13,036".⁸ This indicates that the contribution of street food vendors to the country's economy is significant though they face similar problems as other street vendors, namely, lack of security and lack of institutional facilities.

The Colombo Municipality has tried to set up a model for street food vendors. According to Keerthi Mafasinghe,⁹ food inspector, Colombo Municipal Council, the municipality has organised a group of 35 food vendors called the Galle Face Green Food Vendors. Carts are provided by the municipality and they maintain a high standard of hygiene. The activities of this group are highlighted by the public health department as an ideal project.

Bangkok (Thailand)

The most observable fact about Bangkok is its street vendors. Almost every street in this city has street vendors selling an array of items – clothes, curios, electronic items and a wide variety of cooked and raw food. In fact the food vendors of Bangkok are known for their cheap but nutritious fare. For the local population, the food stalls are an integral part of life in Bangkok, particularly the makeshift restaurants. Hundreds of people rely on them for a good meal at low costs.

The municipal authorities in Bangkok have demarcated sites where street vendors can operate. There are 287 such sites in the city. There are also 14 sites on private land. The sites officially allotted for street vending are not sufficient for accommodating all street vendors. Moreover, these areas do not cover all sections of the city and hence the customers are not catered to. This has led to street vendors operating in unauthorised areas. There are 407 sites where vendors conduct their business but these are unofficial areas. This means that the majority of street vendors in the city operate in sites that are unauthorised.

Street vending is an important source of income for the urban poor. The author had visited some slums in Bangkok in May 2003 and found that most of the slum dwellers were engaged in street food hawking. The number of street vendors in the city increased rapidly after the monetary crisis of 1998 that affected the group of countries known as the Asian tigers. Many of the workers who lost their jobs as a result of the crisis and others who could not find jobs, took to street vending as a source of livelihood.

An FAO study on street food vendors in south-east Asia¹⁰ notes that in 1993 there were 6,040 street hawkers operating in the city selling raw food stuff (vegetables, fruits, meat and sea food). This represented around 30 per cent of the total street hawkers at that time. In other words, the total number of street vendors was around 19-20,000. When the FAO study was conducted in 2001, it found that there were 26,000 food hawkers operating in the authorised areas. This means that the number of food vendors in the authorised areas was higher than the total number of street

vendors in 1993. If we take into account the unauthorised areas, which are much larger than the authorised areas, and the private sites, the number of street vendors in the city should be over 1,00,000.

The proliferation of food vendors in Bangkok is due to a number of reasons. Firstly, there is a tradition among the population of eating out. Hence food vendors form a part of the cultural traditions of the urban population. Secondly, rapid urbanisation as a result of migration from rural areas and the long hours of work for the low paid workers in the informal sector often leave the urban poor with little time to cook proper meals. They thus depend on street food vendors to provide them with cheap but nutritious meals. Thirdly, food vendors attract the tourists who are on the look out for local variety of food. Fourthly, according to the FAO study, "...low-income families purchase their food (including fish) on a daily basis, since they don't have enough money to purchase large amounts of food." These people buy fish by the small dish in street markets. Sale of fish by the small dish is a traditional service offered only by street food hawkers and the poor benefit by this.

Despite the service provided by street vendors to the general public, their contributions are not viewed in the same light by the authorities. Street vendors, especially those in unauthorised areas, are subject to frequent raids and evictions. In fact at one time the government was thinking of passing a law banning street vendors in Bangkok as they caused clogging of the pavements and the streets. The famous traffic snarls of Bangkok are attributed to street vendors. There is no evidence that street vendors cause traffic problems, they operate from pavements and not on the roads. In reality, the road space is not sufficient to accommodate the growing number of private vehicles and that is what causes traffic problems. After the sky-rail was commissioned the traffic problem, at least in areas where the rail operates, has lessened considerably as many car owners now prefer to take the sky-rail to their work places.

The one odd feature about street vendors in Bangkok is that they are not unionised. This seems surprising given their large numbers and the problems that they face from the authorities. Perhaps unionisation could have got them protection to carry out their activities, recognition and possibly government support.

Singapore

If we go by the reports of the hawkers' department of the government of Singapore, this must be the only country in the world where all street vendors are licensed. It is the duty of the Hawkers' Department to check that there are no unlicensed hawkers and issue licences to those wanting to hawk goods on the pavements. As in most south-east Asian countries, in Singapore too, food hawkers predominate. In 1971, a national programme aimed at building food centres and markets to resettle licensed street food hawkers was taken up. The programme provided basic stall facilities and services such as piped potable water, electricity and garbage collection and disposal. By 1996, all street hawkers had been completely resettled into food centres and markets.¹¹ In 1988, there were 23,331 hawkers operating in 184 centres of whom 18,878 were engaged in selling cooked food. At present there are nearly 50,000 street vendors in this city-state.

The hawkers' department plays an active role in ensuring that the hawkers keep their environment clean and do not place constraints on pedestrians. Its officials inspect all stalls and see that they abide by the Environmental Public Health Act of 1968. It also organises regular training courses on food and personal

hygiene, and nutrition. Between 1990 and 1996 the department had trained more than 10,000 hawkers.

The composition of the city's street vending population is changing. There is an emergence of younger, better educated street vendors.¹² This change is attributed to the rising unemployment that has put 13,000 graduates out of jobs. Many of these have taken to street vending. The change is more noticeable in food hawking. The variety of food offered is wider than the traditional fare earlier. The younger, educated food vendors are willing to experiment with new international dishes and this has increased their popularity. The government decided to upgrade the food stalls in the densely populated residential areas. By 2003, 45 such centres were upgraded. Though the rents charged by the government have increased, the street vendors still get a lot of clientele because the items they sell are cheaper than those sold in shops.

One significant fact about street vendors in Singapore is that over the past 30 years they have helped keep the cost of living down since workers, students and the poorer sections depend on them for their daily necessities, including their meals. This is true of other places as well but unfortunately the planners rarely consider these contributions to the local economy.

Kuala Lumpur¹³

The significant feature about Malaysia is that it is one of the few countries in Asia that has given some form of recognition to street vendors. In 1990, Malaysia formulated the National Policy on Hawkers. This is a comprehensive plan to tackle the social and economic problems associated with street vending. Its implementation includes the provision of funds to support credit schemes and training programmes for street vendors to improve their facilities. The regulation and control of street vendors is under the department of hawkers and petty traders (DHPT) established in 1986. The objectives of the department include the development, modernisation and management of the street vendors in line with the objective of making Kuala Lumpur a clean, healthy and beautiful city for the local people and tourists.

As in the case of the other south-east Asian countries, the number of street vendors in Kuala Lumpur has risen sharply since the Asian financial crisis. According to DHPT the number of licensed street vendors rose by 30 per cent between 1990 and 2000. The total number of licensed street vendors in 2000 was nearly 35,000. In addition it was believed that there were more than 12,000 unlicensed street vendors operating. This figure could be an underestimation as there is no proper survey on the actual number of street vendors in the city. The increase of unlicensed street vendors is mainly because the DHPT has stopped issuing licenses after 1996. The financial crises took place three years later and a number of people who had lost their jobs during the time of the crises took to street vending.

The objective of the DHPT is to relocate street vendors, in the case of food hawkers, to food centres in buildings or to central sites. It also helps in designing vans for mobile hawking. Around 35 per cent of the total number of street vendors are food hawkers. However there are other sites where street vendors can carry out their business. These are the densely populated residential areas and the industrial estates. There are hardly any hawking sites in these areas. More licences could be granted if this was done. Licensed street vendors have access to institutional credit as the government has provided funds for this. Training programmes are organised regularly for these vendors in which they are taught about health and hygiene, business skills, accounts, etc. The

DHPT organises some of these programmes and seeks the cooperation of NGOs too. There are 60 NGOs engaged in this activity. The unlicensed street vendors do not get any of these benefits.

The ethnic composition of street vendors has shown changes. In 1970 only 4.4 per cent of Malays were engaged in street vending. Chinese constituted 80.8 per cent of the street vendors while Indians constituted 14.8 per cent. Since 1980 the proportion of Indians have reduced. In 2000 there were 11,170 (31 per cent) Malays, 20,812 (59.3 per cent) Chinese and 3,138 (9.0 per cent) Indians who were licenced street vendors. It is believed that this change is due to the licences issued by the DHPT as it preferred to grant more licences to the indigenous Malay population.

Manila

Like Kuala Lumpur, Manila (comprising seven municipalities) has devised some plans for street vendors. The metropolis' business promotion and development office has a division known as the hawkers permit services. This division was created by city ordinance No 79-2 to receive, process, review, analyse applications for street vending. It has inspectors who are expected to regulate street trade and collect daily fees from regular (licensed) and other street vendors.¹⁴ The object it appears is increase revenue of the municipalities.

In 2001 the Philippines government took a decision to legalise street vending. The government decided to issue them identity cards and allow them to ply their trade in certain areas.¹⁵ This move was taken to protect and uphold the rights of the informal sector. A memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed by the department of interior and local government, department of labour, department of trade and industry and the league of provinces.

According to the MoU, city and municipal governments should designate markets, vacant areas near markets, public parks and side streets as certified places. A head count of street vendors would be made to register them as informal workers. The MoU also mentions that the vendors' associations would be encouraged to take on the responsibility of regulating street vendors by ensuring cleanliness on the streets and proper hygiene for food vendors.

Despite all promises, the actual fate of street vendors in the Philippines, especially in Metro Manila where a third of the country's vendors operate, is no better than in most of the other countries mentioned earlier. Though the promised head count never took place, it is estimated that there are around 50,000 street vendors in Metro Manila, most of whom are unregistered, hence illegal. The paper presented by Celerina F Sangil, recreation and welfare service officer, department of social welfare, government of Philippines¹⁶ mentions that according to the hawkers permit services there are about 15,000 street vendors in the metropolitan and only 5,000 of them are legal. Other reports show that these figures are grossly under-estimated.

The main problems faced by the street vendors is that there are no demarcated areas for them to operate. Street food vendors do not have access to piped water and they are hence rendered illegal on health grounds. Street vendors are also blamed for the filth on the pavements and for causing traffic problems. The attitude of the government towards them can be gauged from a report, quoted below, on the latest moves to get them off the streets.

Officials in the Philippines are planning to clear illegal street sellers off pavements by spraying their goods with kerosene. Manila Development Authority chairman Bayani Fernando says the move will make the goods unsellable (sic) and soon make street vending unprofitable.

He has lost patience after the failure of other moves to combat illegal sellers. He plans teams of officials armed with plastic spray bottles filled with kerosene to hit vendors' stalls without warning. Human rights groups are criticising the measure, but Mr Fernando seems unconcerned about the fire safety aspect of dousing materials in flammable liquid. He is unhappy about the litter left behind by street sellers and occasional traffic jams they cause by blocking streets, reports the *Straits Times*, quoting the *Manila Standard* newspaper.

Mr Fernando said: "They can run, but they can no longer sell their goods once we have sprayed these with gas. Eventually, they will lose capital and stop illegal vending. People will no longer buy items that smell of, or are soaked in gasoline, particularly edible goods" [Ananova: Story filed: 14:56 Sunday, August 11, 2002].

Incidentally, Fernando is planning to contest for vice president in the next elections. Another important parliamentarian who supports Fernando's moves to keep the city street clean is Ramon Magsaysay Jr, the son of the late president after whom the Magsaysay award is named. Hence it is clear that though governments pretend to show sympathy to informal sector workers, they hardly ever translate their laws into practice.

The above view was reiterated by the two trade union leaders who participated in the Streetnet regional conference. Maria Mercedes I Nicholas of Katinig, a federation of workers in the informal sector, and Maria R Buanghug of Cebu City United Vendors' Organisation, an affiliate of Katinig, spoke of how despite laws, street vendors are victimised. Though there are laws for legalising street vending, as discussed above, these are never implemented properly. Most vendors are not given licences. It was through Katinig's efforts that the government signed the MoU. However since most of the street vendors were not regularised by law, they are victims of police harassment and evictions. Besides fighting for the rights of street vendors, the two unions have also initiated cooperatives among them. The Kamansi cooperative was initiated by the union at Cebu City. It provides loans for hospitalisation and death assistance. In 2001 the assistance released was pesos 8.3 million. In general, in Philippines, women vendors are more easily unionised than the males.

Hanoi

Street vendors play an important role in urban Vietnam's commerce. They provide a variety of low priced goods and generate employment for a large number of people, especially women. In the case of food vendors around 30 per cent are women.¹⁷ In 1989 the Vietnamese government adopted a law on protection of people's health. A survey on food samples in Hanoi showed that 47 per cent were microbiologically unsafe. Within a few years the scene changed and 23.4 per cent of the food vendors had changed their unhygienic practices. This was done by regular surveillance of food vendors and by training them in hygienic practices. The government has adopted two practices for ensuring safer street food, namely, monitoring street food vendors through a licensing system and educating and training them on hygiene.

A study by Darunee Tantiwiranond¹⁸ notes that women are in the forefront of Vietnam's economy. To overcome high unemployment, the government is focusing on promotion of the formal sector. The progress is however not in keeping with the rising poverty. This seems to be the age-old fallacy of most governments in developing countries. They seem to think that the only way to overcome the unfavourable situation of the informal sector is by trying to expand the formal sector, instead

of trying to introduce reforms in the informal sector. The informal sector creates employment, fights poverty and subsidises urban living. Street vendors, especially in Hanoi, are an important component of this sector.

Tantiwiranond's study finds half the women vendors are young, below 29 years and a quarter of them are single. Most of them come from large poor families with at least five siblings. Though a majority of them have some education (up to 12 years) it is not sufficient to get secure employment. Street vending is the major means of their survival.

Most of the female vendors move from door to door carrying their wares in two baskets slung on two ends of a pole that is carried on the shoulder. Most of them sell single items, i.e., either food (vegetable, eggs, processed foods) or household items. A small proportion sells a combination of food and household items. The male vendors on the other hand are engaged in motor cycle repair or sale of higher priced goods such as personal products, souvenirs etc. and their earnings are higher.

Women vendors face problems on the street, most of which are related to their sexuality. Tantiwiranond notes that customers often tease, disrespect or sometimes violate the human dignity of women vendors. There is also a social bias that women cannot perform certain activities such as motor cycle repair, polish shoes or work as taxi drivers at night. Moreover women are expected to look after the home which reduces the time they spend on vending. It also adds strain to their activities.

Tantiwiranond's study notes that the sexual divide is very prevalent in Vietnamese society. There is a sexual division of labour through which certain types of work are designated to women and others to men. For example, he finds that even women vendors feel sorry for male vendors who do door to door vending by carrying two baskets strung on a pole as they feel that this is not a man's job. It is rather surprising to find such division of labour existing in a society that has, in the past, showed remarkable resistance to the super powers.

Tantiwiranond finds that Vietnam is a good case study to understand the determination of people to struggle against all odds not only for self-rule but also for building a different society. Unfortunately the current policy neglects the needs of micro-traders, especially women, in the informal sector. The street vendors are not unionised nor are there any NGOs working for their empowerment. He warns that such policies of neglect may turn the creative urges of the poor to deviant behaviour. This is of course not the problem only of Vietnam but of most developing countries that are intolerant to street vendors.

Cambodia

The Kingdom of Cambodia (as it is now called), like its neighbour Vietnam, has seen a lot of political upheavals in the recent past. Though there has been peace since 1997, Cambodia's economy has been shattered and the government is almost bankrupt. Regular jobs, provided by the government, are few and not well-paid. According to Urban Sector Group (USG), an NGO working among slum dwellers and workers in the informal sector, 95 per cent of all employment is in the informal sector and 80 per cent of the GDP is from this sector.¹⁹

Street vending is one of the important sources of employment for the urban poor in Cambodia, especially women. There is no estimate of the actual number of street vendors in Phnom Penh, the capital, or in the other towns. The data in this section is based on two studies conducted on women vendors.²⁰ According to the

USG study a majority of the street vendors in Phnom Penh (60 per cent) are in the age group 30 to 60 years and most of them (97 per cent) are women. These women represent the poor and they come from large families having 2 to 4 income earners. Cambodia has two poverty lines, the food poverty line and the general poverty line. The food poverty line represents the bare minimum required for basic food and nothing else. Those who come under this line are the poorest. The poverty line represents those earning barely enough for meeting the needs of food, cloth and shelter. Street vendors fall below the poverty line but above the food poverty line.

According to the USG study, the women have to put in hard work and have to spend around 12 to 13 hours a day at their work. They however feel that street vending gives them self-respect as they do not have to depend on others (male members of their family) for their sustenance. According to the study by Kusakabe, women vendors in Phnom Penh are from poor backgrounds and have low levels of education. Street vending is the only way they can earn a living with dignity. She finds that these women are less dependent on their husbands as they are the main bread winners in the family. In most cases the husbands do not have regular jobs and because of 'male superiority' they do not do housework, including taking care of the children's education. Kusakabe finds that street vendors who are widowed or divorced are not interested in finding husbands because they feel that they are independent and do not need the support of males.

The USG study finds that a major motivation for women vendors to earn more is to provide a decent education to their children. However their long hours of work outside the house leaves them little time to look into their children's studies. Most of the vendors said that though they could send their children to school they could not supervise their studies or their homework as they were busy with their work.

The main problem faced by street vendors is the non-recognition of the existence of the informal sector. The street vendors do not have any permanent places to sell their goods. They thus cannot retain regular customers. They are frequently harassed by the police and the market security officials. The USG study notes that rent-seeking is high and the only way the women can stay on the streets is by paying bribes to these officials. If they don't pay their goods are confiscated or even destroyed. The study also found that some of the women vendors could sell more goods if they had more space but this would mean more bribes which they could not afford to pay.

Access to credit is also a major problem for the women. They either use their own savings to run their business or they borrow from moneylenders at high rates of interest. In fact Kusakabe notes that some of the street vendors she interviewed told her that they worked for three reasons – to eat, to educate their children and to repay their debts.

Seoul²¹

The government of South Korea, like most other governments in Asia, is insensitive to the problems of the urban poor. Street vendors and slum dwellers are under constant attack by the government. Another peculiar feature about Korea is that the government hires gangsters to evict street vendors and slum dwellers. The Korean delegates at the first conference of Streetnet International held at Seoul (March 16-19, 2004) mentioned that despite changes in governments, the plight of street vendors remained unchanged. According to the representative of Korean

Congress of Trade Unions (KCTU), the main federation of trade unions in Korea, 57 per cent of the workers are in the informal sector at present. This sector accounts for the earnings of 70 per cent of the women workers and 60 per cent of the male workers in the country. Yet this sector is not recognised by the government.

The economic crisis in Korea in 1998 resulted in massive restructuring. As a result several workers in the formal sector lost their jobs and had to move to the informal sector. After the Asian financial crisis the number of street vendors increased even more and at present Seoul has around 8,00,000 street vendors. Faced by constant harassment, the street vendors of Korea have formed a national alliance known as National Federation of Korean Street Vendors (NFKSV). This federation estimates that the total number of street vendors in Korea could number around 1 million, which seems an inflated figure. However, the fact remains that street vendors form an important component of Korea's work force and their problems should not be ignored by the government.

The street vendors face problems especially during international events taking place at Seoul. These are the times when the street vendors are forcibly evicted by the authorities, aided by gangsters. In 1986 the first crackdown took place as the Asian Games were hosted in Seoul. This was followed by crackdowns in 1988 as the Olympics were being held then. Street vendors faced a similar situation in 2002 when the FIFA World Cup (football) tournament was held there. Street vendors' organisations have reacted strongly to such evictions. The clashes between them and the authorities have been violent. The Korean street vendors appear to be more militant than their counterparts in other Asian countries. This mainly comes as a reaction to the extremely harsh attitude of the government towards them.

The street vendors have, on occasions, managed to negotiate with the government on specific problems. For example, after the eviction drive for the Olympics, the street vendors' union negotiated with the local government for alternative space. This was given to them in a street close to the Olympic stadium. Today this area has become an important centre for hawkers' trade and has become an attraction for tourists. Similarly, Streetnet and NFKSV were able to avert some of the major eviction drives that were to take place before the World Cup football tournament. The Bodh Gaya regional conference of Streetnet passed a resolution urging the Korean government to take into account the problems of street vendors. Later representatives of Streetnet and NFKSV met the government representatives and convinced them that eviction of street vendors was not a solution.

If the government continues to ignore the existence of the growing numbers of street vendors, the crisis is bound to increase. It is therefore necessary to convince the government to take a positive view on street vendors and legalise their trade. This can be done through negotiations but prior to that it will be necessary to assess the actual number of people engaged in this trade. The Korean representatives at the Streetnet International conference laid greater stress on this aspect.

India

The number of street vendors in Indian cities has increased sharply during the past few years, especially after 1991 when the policies relating to structural adjustment and liberalisation were introduced. It is now estimated that around 2.5 per cent of the urban population is engaged in this occupation.

Studies on street vendors/hawkers are few and are focused mainly on some cities. In 2000, the National Alliance of Street

Vendors in India (NASVI)²² organised a study on hawkers in seven cities which included Mumbai, Kolkata, Bangalore, Bhubaneswar, Patna, Ahmedabad and Imphal. This could be taken as one of the more comprehensive studies on street vending. Two more studies were conducted on street vendors in Mumbai, besides the one by NASVI. In 1998, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) commissioned Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) and Youth for Voluntary Action and Unity (YUVA) to conduct a census of hawkers on municipal lands.²³ In 2001, SNDT Women's University, in collaboration with International Labour Organisation conducted a study on street vendors.²⁴

An interesting aspect of these studies is that they all find common features among street vendors. Their earnings vary between Rs 50 and Rs 80 per day. Women earn between Rs 40 and Rs 60 per day. They work under gruelling conditions for long hours and are frequently harassed by the municipal authorities and the police. The NASVI study found that around 20 per cent of their earnings are taken as rent by the authorities. In Mumbai the annual collection of rent is around Rs 400 crore. A study by *Manushi* in Delhi shows that the authorities rake in Rs 50 crore a day from street vendors and cycle rickshaw drivers. The SNDT – ILO study on Mumbai found that around 85 per cent of the street vendors complained of stress related diseases – migraine, hyper acidity, hyper tension and high blood pressure.

A fairly high proportion of vendors were once workers in the formal sector and they had taken to street vending after they lost their jobs. This proportion is higher in cities like Kolkata (50 per cent), Mumbai and Ahmedabad (30 per cent). These cities were once centres of industry but during the past decade or two, the large industries have shut down. A study by SEWA in Ahmedabad notes that half the laid-off textile workers in Ahmedabad have taken to street vending. The other vendors are mainly migrants from rural areas or from small towns who came to these cities to find employment. They could not find regular jobs so they took to street vending.

In Delhi, the feminist journal *Manushi*, mentioned above, conducted a study on street vendors which showed the stark reality of how these people are exploited and harassed by the authorities.²⁵ This study provoked the prime minister to write to the Lt Governor of the union territory of Delhi to change the administration's oppressive policies on street vendors. The prime minister's office also issued a concept note on this subject which contained important guidelines.

There are some interesting studies from town planners. Gitam Tiwari and Dinesh Mohan, both of Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, have made significant contributions to research on use of pavement space, pollution control and use of road space with regard to street vending.²⁸ They have shown that having street vendors near housing complexes reduces pollution levels as residents do not need to use cars or two-wheelers to buy their daily requirements as these are available literally at their door steps.

Women Vendors

The NASVI study found that the income of women vendors is lower than the men because mainly of two reasons. Most of the women belonged to families that were poorer than those of male street vendors so they had less capital to invest in their business. Secondly, they could not spend as much time on their work as the males because they had to take care of the home as well. Moreover in cities like Kolkata and Patna, women

vendors were harassed by the male vendors and were not allowed to sit on the pavements. In cities where they are unionised, as in Ahmedabad, their problems are not as acute.

In Mumbai, the studies show that most of the women street vendors belong to families in which the male members were once employed in better paid, secure jobs in the formal sector. They were unemployed when their enterprises closed. Their wives took to street vending to make ends meet.

There is no clear picture of the number of women vendors, except in Ahmedabad where around 40 per cent of the 80,000 street vendors are women. In other cities they are an invisible category. The male vendors are more visible as they sell greater varieties of goods – clothes, fruits, household items etc. Most of the food vendors are males. The level of unionisation is higher among them and they are thus able to protect themselves better than the women vendors. There is therefore a need to make a proper assessment of women vendors. At a rough guess, they should constitute 30 per cent of the total population. They are mainly small vendors and they are hardly unionised (except in Ahmedabad). These factors add to their invisibility.

Food Vendors

Studies of food vendors have been conducted by the FAO in some of the cities. These include Pune, Hyderabad, Mumbai, Bangalore, and Kolkata. The Kolkata study, conducted by the National Institute of Public Health and Hygiene, was the most important one conducted to date. It looked into all aspects of street food vending situation of the city, namely, type of vendors and consumers; timing of operation, cost and profits, nutritive value, physical, chemical and detailed microbiological analysis of all varieties of foods and water.²⁶ One of its significant findings was that street foods in the city were both cheap and nutritious. A bowl of hot Chinese soup cost Rs 5 and provided 1,000 calories, the cheapest form of calories. Moreover the study found that cooking in the open (in front of the consumers) ensured that the food was fresh and unadulterated.

There are a few other studies that deal with important aspects of street food vending. Mini Bhattacharyya Thakur's²⁷ doctoral dissertation on street food vendors in Guwahati in north-east India highlights their role in providing cheap food to the people and their employment potential. She notes that the food vendors face the problem of capital. They depend mainly on loans from friends, family or moneylenders to run their business. Even those that are licensed rarely approach banks because of the huge paper work involved in getting loans.

Summary and Conclusions

We have been able to collect information on street vendors for most of the countries in Asia. The information presented is in no way comprehensive, covering all aspects of street vending. Unfortunately there are not many studies on the socio-economic conditions of street vendors in Asia and this is one of the main handicaps of the present study. Moreover, there is little knowledge of the actual number of street vendors in the various Asian countries. We shall summarise the main findings of this paper in the next few paragraphs and try to raise the important common issues.

One of the noticeable features of the cities in Asia is the growing number of street vendors. The growth is mainly related to the changes in the economy of these countries. Street vending

increases with the shrinking of jobs in the formal sector and with lack of gainful employment in rural areas. The rural unemployed tend to move to the cities in search of employment. They usually possess low skills and have low levels of education. Both factors make it almost impossible for them to find regular jobs in the formal sector. Street vending is one of the few options they have for earning a living. Entry into this trade is easier because it does not require high skills and the capital involved is low. This is seen in the case of Bangladesh, Nepal, Vietnam and Cambodia.

In the other countries, especially the 'Asian tigers' – Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Korea – there was a rapid increase in the number of street vendors after the monetary crisis of 1998. These countries faced severe economic crisis and many industries closed down rendering hundreds of thousands of workers unemployed. In India, the number of street vendors increased after the economic liberalisation policy was initiated in 1991. The traditional industrial cities, such as Mumbai, Ahmedabad and Kolkata saw a decline in the formal sector as large factories closed down and started outsourcing to the small scale industries. A section of the workers in the formal sector, or their wives, took to street vending after they lost their jobs.

Unfortunately, the governments in these countries have more or less refused to recognise street vending as a legal activity and they in fact view these vendors as irritants to the city's development. Even in countries like Vietnam and Cambodia, which do not have a large formal sector, the governments do not give legal recognition to street vending. This is disappointing as the governments of both countries are ideologically committed to the interests of the working class, though in both countries street vendors are harassed in the same manner as in the other 'pro-capitalist' countries. As a result, street vendors in most Asian countries live a precarious existence as they face the constant threat of eviction and destruction of their property.

Malaysia, Philippines and India²⁸ have policies for regulating and protecting street vendors. Of the three only Malaysia seems to be sincere in implementing its policy. This is the only country where licensed street vendors (most of them are licensed) are provided facilities for conducting their trade and the government also provides credit facilities for them. In Singapore too the condition of street vendors is somewhat better. Though there is no policy for street vendors, the state has tried to regularise all street vendors by providing them licences. This enables them to have proper stalls and maintain proper hygiene. Though Philippines has a national policy the government refuses to recognise most of the street vendors and it takes harsh measures to clear them off the pavements. India too has recently framed a national policy for street vendors which, if implemented, will provide security to them. At present, the street vendors face constant harassment from the authorities and rent seeking is very high.

Most of the street vendors in Asia are not unionised. The reports of the regional conference of Streetnet International show that trade unions of street vendors are few. In most cases the larger, mainstream, unions are not interested in drawing street vendors into their folds. In fact most of the problems of the street vendors are related to their lack of unionisation. The delegates from Asian countries participating in the Streetnet conference all spoke of lack of awareness among the street vendors of their rights. Unionisation would provide them with a common platform to press for their rights and protect them. In this way they could intervene in policy matters relating to their right to carry on their activities. In general, street vendors are not represented in local

bodies. SEWA as a union is an exception as it has been able to intervene in the policies of the municipal corporation in Ahmedabad and also at the national level. It provides an example of how unionisation could benefit street vendors.

Only two countries in Asia have federations or alliances of street vendors. These are Korea and India. Both countries are contrasts as far as the intervention to policies are concerned. In Korea the federation (NFKSV) was formed mainly to resist the oppression of the state. The battle lines between the two are clearly drawn and both are hostile to each other. The Korean government appears unduly harsh on street vendors as it has spared no means to evict them. This must be the only country where the government hires gangsters to evict street vendors. This makes it almost impossible for the federation to enter into a policy dialogue with the administration.

In India, the National Alliance of Street Vendors of India (NASVI) has been more successful. It has been able to intervene at the national level and at local levels in some cases to initiate policy dialogues with the concerned authorities. Its greatest success has been the initiation of the national policy.

Finally, it is necessary to summarise the condition of women street vendors in these countries. Women vendors form the lowest rungs among street vendors. In most cases they take to this trade because of poverty and because the male members in the family do not have jobs. They are found in greater numbers in Vietnam and Cambodia where they form the majority. In other countries they form a lesser, but nonetheless significant, component. Unionisation among them is low and their incomes are also lower than those of male vendors. In India most trade unions of street vendors, with the exception of SEWA, tend to ignore them. There are a few instances of trade unions having a women's wing, as in Bangladesh and India, but these do not play a significant role in influencing the policies of that trade union. Their low income, double burden of having to work on the streets and look after the home and low level of unionisation make them the invisible section of street vendors.

In conclusion it can be said that though the Asian countries have witnessed an increase in street vendors, their governments are by and large indifferent to the specific needs of this sector. Street vendors perform an important role in providing services to the urban population, especially the poor. Their contributions are unfortunately hardly ever recognised by the governments. Instead, the governments are more often than not hostile to them. This is a result of a broader issue concerning the informal sector as a whole. In most Asian countries the informal sector is very large and it constitutes the mainstay of the economy. Instead of protecting this sector and ensuring that its workers get their minimum dues, the governments are indifferent to their existence. Street vendors are an important part of the informal sector not only because of their numbers but because of the crucial roles they play in preserving this sector. The goods sold by street vendors are usually consumed by those in the informal sector, as they are cheap. Moreover, a significant amount of goods produced by small industrial units in the informal sector is marketed through them. In fact we have a situation where one section of the urban poor (street vendors) helps the other sections of the urban poor by providing them low priced goods and by marketing their products. Unfortunately, instead of recognising their contributions to the economy, governments view street vendors as encroachers or criminals. **[FW]**

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