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BOOK REVIEWS

Sharit K. Bhowmik (ed.), *Street Vendors in the Global Urban Economy*, Routledge, Delhi, 2010, pp. 320, Rs. 695.

For a relatively slim edited volume, on a part of the informal economy that is even harder to empirically research than the sector itself is widely acknowledged to be, *Street Vendors in the Global Urban Economy* covers a lot of ground. Geographically, apart from three survey papers on street vending in Asia, Africa and Latin America, it includes papers on individual city case studies in each continent. Descriptively, it affords a comprehensive account of the literature, including the grey literature, on the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of street vendors, on their working conditions and lives, their hardships and stories. Analytically, it explores themes that pervade and colour the informal sector experience and reality in the city more generally, depressingly so and across the developing world, including questions of visibility, gender dynamics, prejudice, legality, contested imaginings and the use of public space across class divides, order, displacement and relocation, organized and associative power, policy and its actual implementation, regulation and governance. Consequently, on reaching the end of the volume, I took the editor's claims about what it does at the beginning to be rather too modest!

Perhaps this thoroughness is explained by the fact that the editor is not only a respected expert on the urban poor and the informal sector, but is the best kind of academic, that is, one who steps out of his ivory tower to engage in the real world and seeks to influence policy for the better. As Renana Jhabvala puts it in the foreword, Bhowmik emerged as a 'champion' for street vendors. SEWA's efforts in this area were marked. *Inter alia*, it convened a global meeting of street vendor representatives in 1995, in the wake of which an international alliance was formed (StreetNet) and the Bellagio International Declaration of Street Vendors was pronounced, calling upon governments to establish national street vendor policies. It also organized a national workshop in 1998, which resulted in the foundation of the National Alliance of Street Vendors, India (NASVI). Working alongside SEWA, Bhowmik conducted a large-scale study on street vending across seven cities of India in the early 2000s. Sustained activism by this 'advocacy coalition', as Lintelo terms it in his revealing chapter on the policy-making process in this volume, resulted in the first national policy for this group in the country (National Urban Street Vendors Policy, 2004), as also the sensitive perspective subsequently taken on it by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS).

As one of the *raison d'etres* for the volume, Bhowmik notes in the introduction that across continents, there appears to be very little systematic research on street vendors. In part, this is because some of them are even more mobile than informal sector workers as a whole. In her survey chapter on Africa, Skinner finds that compiling robust statistics on this segment is difficult, at both the national and city levels, and, therefore, such empirical studies are scarce. At the same time, Roever argues, for Latin America, cross-nationally comparable longitudinal data is sorely needed for sound policy-making. In none of these regions is there any doubt, however, that due to the over-arching trends of urbanization, migration and

'economic development' (read some combination of economic crises, followed by structural adjustment programmes and neo-liberal reforms), the numbers of poor engaged in the occupation of street vending are on the rise. This is despite each continent's differing starting points in the aforementioned areas, the greater or lesser intensity of trends, and their own peculiarities and trajectories. Moreover, the demographic and socio-economic profiles of street vendors, which many chapters in the book do a fine job of outlining, have some commonalities across regions: a disproportionate number of women street vendors, many from female-headed households supporting entire families; 'migrants' who have ironically lived a long time in the city; perceptions of them being 'outsiders' and 'temporary', even when their reality is very different, and so on.

In terms of the working conditions and day-to-day lives of street vendors in the city, many of the chapters go into some detail on the specific issues they confront. The first relates to their use of public space. Plying their trade on streets, as by definition they do, they are more visible as compared to some other informal sector actors. This directly leads to the question of their legal status and their right to continue doing what they do, where they do it. Invariably—*de jure* or *de facto* (with an example of the latter being the State agreeing in principle to issue licences for valid operation, but then in actual practice, not issuing any new ones in recent decades, or issuing very few licences relative to the total demand)—street vending, like many other informal sector occupations, is kept illegal to engender insecurity and vulnerability in this segment of the population. This, in turn, opens up spaces for economic exploitation by frontline State actors, in the form of *hafta* payments to municipal workers or the police (as outlined in Anjaria's brilliant chapter on Mumbai, where he concludes that the power of the State derives from transgressions rather than the rationality of ordering practices), or provides a politically expedient captive constituency just before elections. Itikawa's paper on Sao Paulo, titled "Clandestine Geometrics", depressingly speaks of precisely the same phenomenon.

To continue in a similar vein, narratives of periodic episodes of evictions and demolitions and relocations tremble through the chapters, intensifying to script just prior to large-scale national and international events, ostensibly showcasing the 'world-class' nature of the city (as highlighted in Jhabvala's foreword and explored in Skinner's Africa survey). A telling case study is that of the Red Fort market being cleared just before Independence Day celebrations (Kumar and Bhowmik's chapter on Delhi). Underlying these violent attempts at creating order in the city, by getting the messy subaltern deprived reality of the masses to forcibly submit to elite imaginations of a first-world aesthetic, lie prejudiced perceptions of the 'marginal' street vendor and 'temporary' informal sector. They are never the entrepreneurs (as they reflexively perceive themselves to be in Nirathron's chapter on Bangkok), efficiently serving demand and helping the city function. Rather, they are the interlopers that must gain ownership over space by "slowly normalizing their presence on the street" (p. 72). Their occupation continues to be viewed as a stepping stone to the formal sector, fleeting in nature, regardless of how much evidence there is to the contrary (Kusakabe's paper on Phnom Penh).

Street vending is seen by the authorities and the law predominantly as a 'problem' that needs 'eradicating', even where its necessity—on poverty, employment and market grounds—is reluctantly acknowledged. In the few cases that sensitive national policies are promulgated, they are rarely implemented in the spirit in which they are meant to be. This translates into two features of life for street vendors, wherever in the developing world they are situated: (1) The very fact that the State or law is unwilling or unable to enforce regulation, with many an instance of a 'lack of clear rules of the game' (Rincon's paper on Caracas), creates a space the interstices of which ironically allow for their continued existence and operation. (2) They are forever rendered extremely vulnerable and subject to the whims of petty officials—what this volume repeatedly, in different regional contexts, calls 'low levels of constant harassment'—and the kindness of strangers. No wonder then that the constant plea in this book is for the State to bestow legitimacy and security on street vendors, which they are revealed to value above everything else they could think of demanding from the State (including financial help, entrepreneurial training, etc.).

Given that this volume is about the urban sphere, it's also nice to see a contribution by a planner (Dalwadi on Vadodara) in a sea of submissions by social scientists, detailing the nitty-gritty of what the integration of street vending into city planning would actually involve. Amongst the multiplicity of stakeholders and actors engaged universally in policy-making and governance of the city, the ubiquitous planner trumps, at least insofar as outdated, irrelevant and dysfunctional Master Plans are waved about in working group committees and courts of law to justify and sanitize the marginalization of the informal sector, and no matter that their vision is highly divorced from the reality. It's refreshing to see how someone from that discipline would work with, and towards, a common vision shared by social scientists, resulting in a mutually workable city for all. This volume would have been further enriched had there been a wider discussion of the other compelling factors moulding urban space and usage in certain directions, for example, infrastructure development leading to a reconfiguration of distances and escalating land values.

Finally, there can be no volume that engages with labour issues without exploring questions of organization and associative power. This book tackles the issue of collective action at various levels: the features of street vending that naturally make for a solitary pursuit, one disaggregated by activity, commodity and at times, peripatetic location; the invisibility of women and their concerns in the formal structure and deliberation of the few unions that exist; the difficulty, but absolute imperative, of having a collective voice at the national and international levels, that can speak as one to authority and in policy-making forums. The very fact that this volume is the result of, in Lintelo's memorable term, an 'advocacy coalition' and Bhowmik's time working with WIEGO's Urban Policies Programme, suggest the possibilities and power of coming together to take forward the cause of a certain section of the informal sector.

In conclusion, I highly recommend this volume for anyone interested in street vending, as a singular occupational segment of a heterogeneous informal sector.

The book does a fine job of balancing the peculiarities of this sub-sector, with the commonalities and experiences of the sector at large, all embedded within the contested and shrinking space of a dismally generic city—at least in terms of the problems looming over and confounding it—in the developing world.

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