



City Calls to City Walls: Pheriwallah/wallihs and the (Un)contested Spaces of Kolkata¹

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Transformation of the built environment of a city has diverse effects on various segments of its population. Kolkata, with its 'hybrid' population and its two decade old history of post liberalisation housing reforms, presents an interesting case study here. On the one hand, these reforms have facilitated the replacement of pre-existing single or double storied buildings with new housing projects within the city. On the other, they have created new planned towns like Rajarhat at the city fringes which is characterised by – apart from the height of the houses – the enclosed 'gated community'. Both in its rising skyline and exclusionary structure these transformations reflect the globally emerging neo-liberal understanding of the city as a segregated living space. The gated community's increased security measures, self-sufficiency in terms of amenities, partition and restriction of road use within its walls, and non-allowance of 'strangers' within its legal space has been conducive in extending the global model of the 'gated city' into Kolkata.

Existing literature points out how the West Bengal Government with its Public-Private Partnership initiative originally introduced the housing reforms to benefit the urban poor. Urmi Sengupta (2004: 2-5) argues that the multiplier effect of property value nullified Government intervention and made it unaffordable for them. Restructuring of the urban housing sector took place hand in hand with the increased formalisation of the retail sector. The new liberalised and privatised set up was extremely favourable to the upper strata of the so-called middle classes of the city whose investment in real estate has facilitated its growth and whose consumerist practices have been significantly shaped by it.



Increased formalisation of living space has resulted in possible 'otherisation' of much of the 'informal' population. The Pheriwallah/wallihs (hawkers, peddlers or mobile vendors) provide an interesting instance here. Kolkata being the point of convergence for labour and capital from vast areas of West Bengal has been the traditional site of livelihood for this occupational group. Initiated into this profession for generations, their mode of merchandising and interacting with the potential clientele has been heavily dependent on the cityscape. Their mobility on the streets, vocal calls and hanks announcing their arrival and transaction at the door of a household is what characterises them and makes them vulnerable in an event of changing city structure.

Little thought has been given to this occupational group until recently. Their modus operandi has existed since the dawn of trading as part of a local and regional trading pattern, supplementing inter-regional and transregional trade. Due to its high flexibility and the constant local demand it has survived till today. What is interesting is that it has not just survived, but also thrived as one of the only means of livelihood for those who do not have the capital to set up even a temporary stall. What has also made it a favourable means of earning is its invisibility to the law except in the instances of vexing aberrations.²

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At the initial stages of this project, there seemed a possibility that the rapid habitat transformation of the upper strata of the urban middle classes and the changes in their models of consumption have seriously threatened the viability of this trade. Whether or not the demand for the Pheriwallah/wallih's wares and services still exist seemed secondary in the face of their possible obliteration from the aural and visual range of their upper class clientele. With their capacity to compete impeded and their informal existence made irrelevant in the increasingly formalised structure, the concern of their redundancy raises a pertinent challenge to the new face of the city.

But delving deeper into this theme, it became evident that what is happening is much more complex than such a hypothesis indicates. On the one hand, the changing city structure is growing hostile to this trade, pushing it to selected regions in the city, while, on the other, there is a growing concern being expressed among the urban elite about the increase in population of the street vendors. What further complicates this tussle is the recent passing of the pro-street vendor act by the Indian Government.³ The act and the circumstances leading to the act need to be examined in order to interrogate whether it is



intended upon providing rights to the vendors or whether its regulatory aspects are catering to the needs of the new structure of the city.

Keeping this in perspective, this study will try to address the following two questions. Firstly, to what extent has the creation of the 'gated communities' impeded the mode of merchandising for the Pheriwallah/wallihs and how have they adapted to the changed conditions? Secondly, what does this interaction between living space and livelihood reveal about how the 'informal' is being accommodated (or not) in the post-liberalised structure of the city? While the first question is more specific and attempts to identify the initiatives taken by these traders themselves to adapt, the second question endeavours to interrogate the role of the State⁴ and whether it is at all moving towards inclusive development.

Defining the field

In order to understand the intricate ways in which the pheriwallah/wallihs and the residents of the city are tied, it becomes necessary to adopt ethnographic methods. The mobility of the most important group of respondents – the pheriwallahs⁵ – posed a significant challenge. Constantly on the move, these traders seem to appear only when they were in the act of trading, sometimes riding a cycle or pushing a van-cart, thus making it difficult for them to be tracked. What also needed to be kept in mind is that merely choosing regions where these pheriwallahs wander would not capture the variegated nature of the city's residents. The various kinds of living spaces had to be taken into account as well, which varied from single or double storied buildings and apartments to housing co-operatives and housing complexes that co-exist within this city.

The nature of the area was an important determinant based on which the following regions were selected: Salt Lake in the north-west of the city, Sovabazar in the north, Behala-Mahestala in the south-east and Bansdrani-Garia region in the south. These regions are geographically spread across the city and they also differ characteristically from each other. Sovabazar is an area that has stand-alone double or triple storeyed houses that are often more than hundred years old. This area is also marked by the absence of high-rise or new apartments compared to central and south Kolkata. Salt Lake is a planned satellite town that is divided into five sectors. While sector one is the oldest comprising housing co-operatives, sector five is relatively newer and mostly clustered with corporate houses. Behala-Mahestala lies on



the border of the city consisting of the so called peri-urban spaces and it displays a topography comprising a series of single storeyed buildings interjected in the recent years by new housing complexes. Bansdrani-Garia is an area that displays a similar contrast in the landscape but is relatively more connected to the rest of the city due to the extension of the Kolkata Metro Railway service into these areas.

The interviews were structured thematically and were not restricted to a questionnaire. Although I covered certain pre-decided questions⁶, I left adequate scope for the respondents to share experiences that were most pertinent to them. Even within the set of pre-decided questions, there was a section in which I floated certain phrases and let the residents respond to it. For example, 'security threat', 'reliability', 'pheriwallah/wallih and memories of their childhood' etc. were some of those phrases. While interviewing the pheriwallahs sometimes certain initial responses decided the course of the rest of the interaction. For example, a pheriwallah in Behala-Mahestala region spoke at length about estrangement from his family when asked about his home-town. Similarly, a pheriwallah in Salt Lake spoke about how he was a pheriwallah initially but then he upgraded his status and became a 'businessman' who can now be contacted through Just Dial!⁷

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In the initial stages of this research, a method was designed to be uniformly applicable to all the regions. Three groups of respondents could be identified, the pheriwallahs, the residents and the security personnels (who can be found at the gate of the housing complexes or guarding stand-alone houses of the rich upper class residents). A separate set of questions for each was framed. Residents were particular chosen from among respondents from the different kinds of housing – whether an individual house or housing cooperative. The perspectives of the residents often differed depending on which floor the resident belonged to. For instance, in Sovabazar, while speaking to the Sengupta family that lived in Shyamapukur Lane, they mentioned that although they did not buy anything from the pheriwallah/wallih, the lady who lived on the ground floor in a room facing the street was a regular patron.

In order to gain entry into these households and also be able to speak to them freely about their preferences, I have followed the snowball sampling method, starting from a local contact and amplifying the spread of my interviewees subsequently.⁸ This method has been used for interviewing the residents, the security personnel in some cases and the pheriwallah/wallih in most cases. Particularly, in



Salt Lake and Behala-Mahestala, pheriwallah/wallihs themselves often invited me to their place of temporary residence so that I could speak to more of them. Similarly, in Salt Lake, one caretaker led to me to another security guard he was friends with. Snowball sampling method also facilitated interviews to take place at the residence of the pheriwallahs which added significantly to my understanding of their lives. However, in Sovabazar and Bansdroni, I had to resort to following pheriwallahs on the streets and requesting them for an interview. In these instances, I happened to face the same kind of uncertainty that the pheriwallah/wallihs themselves face every day in this trade! Also, the chances of getting to talk to them while they were roaming the streets was usually considerably low since they were reluctant to talk in their limited working hours.

The Pheriwallah/wallihs and their Network

At this juncture, it is pertinent to try and understand who the pheriwallah/wallihs are and how they are different from hawkers, a term often considered synonymous. The word 'pheri' literally means to roam and this mobility is the primary characteristic of the pheriwallah/wallihs. Further features that characterise them are their practise of carrying their wares on person or on a vehicle like a cycle or a van-cart and their use of vocal hanks and peculiar sounds to announce their arrival. Various spaces within the city and between cities form their sites of transaction. These traders do not occupy any semi-permanent or temporary fixed space within the city. They can be found anywhere – near a tourist spot like the Victoria Memorial, the Indian Museum or Maidan, at a traffic junction, in a moving vehicle like a bus or train or at someone's doorstep.⁹

This differentiates them from hawkers who set up stalls on the city pavements or market areas. But the difference is not always evident or static. Examples of pheriwallah/wallihs or hawkers, who roam the streets in the morning and are rooted to a fixed spot for a fixed duration during the evening, are abundant. Sometimes the pheriwallah/wallihs also identified themselves as hawkers.¹⁰ In recent legislative literature, these kinds of traders have been identified as the 'mobile street vendors.'¹¹ Mobility separates the pheriwallah/wallihs from the contested sites of public space such as the pavements and the market areas. But their mode of merchandising necessitates that they situate their routes in the audible reach and the visibility range of their



patrons. The latter makes them dependent on the cityscape and vulnerable in an event of change in city structure.

Another, perhaps more significant difference lies in how the hawkers and the pheriwallah/wallihs identify themselves (although the scope of transgressing from one identity to another is abundant). While the hawker's engagement with the city often takes the form of tussle for right over public space, the pheriwallah/wallihs by virtue of their mobility do not encounter this particular issue. As a result, while the hawkers in many areas across the city are organised in several unions that assert their rights and aspirations and at times come in direct conflict with the State (for example, during Operation Sunshine in 1996), (Bandopadhyay 2009: 116) the pheriwallah/wallihs usually do not associate themselves with any such unions. However the pheriwallah/wallihs do not exist as stray individuals or are not disorganised as they are often assumed to be. The fieldwork in the four selected regions of the city revealed the existence of several local networks and organisational set ups.

Both in Behala and Salt Lake, I chanced upon the temporary residence of the pheriwallahs close to the area in which they traded. In Sovabazar, a pheriwallah I stalled on the street revealed that there were several of them living near that area.¹² Similarly, while speaking to another pheriwallah in Bansdroni, he mentioned the name of a place that was not far from where I found him. Both these pheriwallahs claimed that the pheriwallahs that lived with them in the respective areas traded in the same commodity. In Behala, a pheriwallah gave me the location of his 'gumpti' (this term was used by the pheriwallah himself to indicate a temporary brick shelter where they lived and which also provided the point of convergence for these traders.) The 'gumpti' that I visited was an enclosed brick room comprising few mattresses and bare essentials with no windows. The adjacent ones looked quite similar. He claimed that there were several of these 'gumptis' in that area and 10 to 15 of them lived in each such 'gumpti'. In Salt Lake, the husband of my local contact's maid happened to be a pheriwallah. Through that connection, I visited their home in a slum in the fringes of Salt Lake. Even there, I found several pheriwallahs, engaged in the sale of the same commodity living with their families in that slum.

It is not merely the 'ghettoed' existence that is common among the pheriwallahs in the four regions, but also that all of them in some capacity or the other mentioned the Mahajan. Encountering the men-



tion of him for the first time in Behala, I gathered that he was the person in charge of each 'gumpti'. He was in a sense the chief provider as well as guardian for these pheriwallahs. The 'kabadiwallahs', the name by which these pheriwallahs identify themselves, buy scrap material, old plastic objects, plastic and glass bottles, old newspaper, human hair, from the homes in the Behala-Mahestala region and bring it back to the 'gumpti'. The 'gumpti', which is a brick structure with a couple of adjacent brick rooms, had one room devoted to the sorting and the measuring of the collected wares. The 'Mahajan' would then sell off these to a place of his own choice. The 'kabadiwallahs' in turn were given a portion of the profit, a place to stay, food and a cycle to help him trade. Identifying him as a point of convergence of the pheriwallahs, I decided to interview him in the next location I visited, Salt Lake.

In Salt Lake, although the pheriwallahs spoke about selling of the old wares they brought to the Mahajan, further probing revealed that the 'Mahajan' was in fact not a single person but the name used for anyone who would buy their goods. Speaking to a pheriwallah¹³ working in Salt Lake, I learnt what 'Mahajan' meant to the pheriwallahs there. The following is an excerpt from the interview with him which revealed that unlike Behala, they were not tied to the Mahajan.

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- Kothae niye jan? (Where do you take them – the wares?)

Ei gulo jemon amader ekhane baire theke patty ashe tara niye jaye... (These are taken away by the 'party' that comes here from outside...)

- Ekhane ashe mane barir ekhane? (Here, as in, your house?)

Haan mane barite diye jaye plus dekha gelo amra mane jekhane labh pai beshi shekhaneniye jai gari niye shekhane mal delivery diye chole ashi. (Yes, they come to our house and wherever we find more profit we deliver our wares there.)

- Mane ekta kono Mahajaner kache dewar kono bepar nei? (So, there is no particular Mahajan to whom you have to give the wares?)

Na je labh beshi deye takei debo. (No. Whoever gives us more profit, we give him.)

- Ar ekhane ki kono Mahajan ache mane je... (Is there any Mahajan here, someone who...)

Mahajan ache pashei ekta business korey khachhe uni (There is a Mahajan who lives beside this place and earns a living by a business)



- Kintu onar shonge kono somporko nei? (Aren't you related or tied to him in any way?)

Na ache onar shonge ache mane rate ta amra jekhane beshi pai amra mal ta diye ashi. (No, we do carry out business with him but wherever the rate is higher, we sell our wares.)

- Mane emon na je onakei ditey hobe... (So, it's not like that you have to sell only to him...)

Na emon kono kichu nei, amader ichhe moto. Amar jake bhalo laglo takei dilam, rate ta bhalo lagatao toh bishoyeta. Bishoye ta hochhe poisha ta, jekhanei ami labh ta pabo shekhanei ami actually delivery debo maal ta. (No, it is not like that, it depends on our wishes. Whoever I like I give my wares to. What is important is that I need to like the person and the money is also important, so wherever we get better profit we deliver the wares there.)¹⁴

In Bansdrone, the pheriwallah I spoke to was a seller of various household goods that he carried in a van-cart. What was particularly interesting about him was that instead of hanking or making any particular sound like most others, he played a recorded voice which was amplified by an electronic speaker. The small recorded advertisement was in a refined voice, accompanied by a female voice quite different from the one in which the pheriwallahs hanked in terms of dialect or style of speaking. When I asked him whose voice it was, he said it belonged to the 'Mahajan'. His reluctance to give an interview left several questions unanswered.¹⁵ The role of this 'Mahajan' is what needs to be probed here. Does the position of this Mahajan resemble that of the Mahajan I encountered in the 'gumpti'? Or is it that these pheriwallahs are independent of the Mahajan like the pheriwallahs of Salt Lake? If the voice of the man belonged to the Mahajan, then who did the voice of the woman belong to? In Sovabazar, one of the pheriwallah I interviewed mentioned that they all sold their collected wares to a particular shop in the area they lived. Although that structure sounded similar to the one in Mahestala, the pheriwallah denied the existence of any 'Mahajan'. It is possible that the owner of the shop is similar to a Mahajan but without the willingness of the pheriwallah to answer my questions, I was not able to find out any more about it.

The networks that exist surrounding this trade are spread across the city. For example, in Salt Lake, there is a narrow street beside the Bidhannagar Railway Station that has a number of people engaged in a similar business. When the pheriwallahs come to vend in Salt Lake



from their homes in the outskirts of the city or other districts, they rent van-carts or cycles from these people or sometimes leave their own vehicle with these people at night for safe-keeping, paying rent. Speaking to Shyam,¹⁶ who is one such person and who I was introduced to by a fish vendor in that area, revealed that not just pheriwallahs but also daily construction workers follow this practice. He said he had previously been a van-cart driver and had been in this trade over the last ten to twelve years. This is one of the examples of a place where these pheriwallahs converge that is attached to their dwelling place. Another example would be the numerous shops that buy old newspaper and rejected objects from these pheriwallahs. Vineet Agarwal,¹⁷ who works in one such shop in Sovabazar, mentioned how previously numerous pheriwallahs would sell old scrap that they bought from nearby factories. But ever since the factories shut down, their number had gone down significantly and now residents of houses would mostly bring old newspapers to their shop directly.

Such networks also exist with respect to their relationship with the police and municipality. The relationship between the police and the street vendors has a long history of animosity. Whether it was the 'halla gari' in the nineteenth and twentieth century (Chakrabarty 1992: 544-55) or the constant threat to evict hawkers from the streets and pavements on the basis of Section 283 and 431 of IPC and Section 34 of Police Act, the relationship has mostly been sour and often dependant on hefty bribes for its health. (Bhowmik 2010: 6-7) The pheriwallahs on the other hand cannot exactly be 'evicted' as they do not occupy any particular spot in public space but they too stand the threat of being fined or being restricted from entry into an area.

Interviews with pheriwallahs in Salt Lake revealed that they share a rather structured working relationship with the police. The pheriwallahs make a regular payment called the 'mashik'¹⁸ (monthly) to the police in charge of the area where they frequent. If they go to another area, they will have to pay 'mashik' to the police in charge of that area, regardless of whether they visit once, twice or regularly. Asked how the police realised a change in their trading area, they said that the police maintain records of who pays to which area police. If any of them trespassed into another area, they are identified by the goods they carry and then they are hauled to the police station and fined.

Constant tussle with the police has also resulted in creation of small groups amongst the pheriwallahs. Most of the pheriwallahs I have interviewed do not subscribe to any hawkers' union and are mostly



unaware of it. The pheriwallah at Sovabazar mentioned that although there is no organisation or group as such, their interests were often protected by the fellow pheriwallahs of the dwelling area. If any of them fell into trouble, the pheriwallahs would immediately assemble in a group and provide support. This sort of a clannish nature is also present among the pheriwallahs in Maheshtala. It was demonstrated by them when they surrounded me and questioned my intentions when I first went to interview them at their 'gumpti'. In Salt Lake, the group formed by the pheriwallahs is more structured. The pheriwallahs dwelling in that area mentioned the existence of a 'samiti'.¹⁹ Of the 5 interviewees, a 29 year old pheriwallah²⁰ was most vocal about the 'samiti'. The following is an excerpt from the interview.

- Onno jara hawker ache tara kokhono jhamela koreche? (Do the other hawkers ever trouble you?)

Ora kokhono jhamela korey na. Mane Salt Lake e bibhinno rokomer ekta mane shobar ekta ki bolbo ekta party moton ache...mane party bolte temon na mane ki bolbo samiti ache dharun rishka stander oder ekta alada, shokal bela moyela gulo niye ashey je tader ekta department alada amader ekta department alada, karur shonge karur jhamela nei. (No they don't. In Salt Lake, there are various 'party' like groups, as in not exactly a 'party' but rather a 'samiti'. Take for example the rickshaw pullers have a separate one, the cleaners who collect the garbage in the morning have a separate 'department', similarly we have a separate 'department'. None of these have any conflict among themselves.)

- Apnader Department ache ekhane pheriwallahder? (So as pheriwallahs you have a separate department?)

Amra ekta mane doloboddho bhabe achhi ekhane dekha gelo amra ponero jon ba kuri jon achi ekhane doloboddho bhabe eibar amra mash gele ekta chukti bollam tader sathe sheita amra mash gele shobai miley ek jayegae hoye shobai miley tader hathe ekta chukti tuley di, chukti potro hishab e. (We exist as a group here. We are a group of 15-20 people. At the end of the month, we make a deal with them (the police) and we get together and hand over the deal to them as the 'chukti-potro' or the deal.)

- Dol hishabe apnader ar ki ki role ba function thake? (As a group what role do you play, or what are the functions of this group?)

Dol hishabe bolte amader...dol bolte amader dekhun salt lake er moddhey amra pheri korchi, karur kono osubida hole amra shekhane chute jai mane dharun keu jodi ekta osubidae porey thake takey niye amra pachjon boshi ...tumi eta korle keno, ba eta kora uchhit hoyeni tomar ba tomar



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jonne amadero ekta. (As a group we...as a group...see, we trade within Salt Lake, if anybody is in any kind of trouble, we rush there. If somebody is in a problem, we gather around him in a group and ask, why did you do this, you shouldn't have done this, or for you we may also...)

- Ki dhoroner osubide? (What kinds of problems?)
- Osubida bolte dekha gelo dharun apni ekta kothao theke maal nichhen. Ebar uni amake maal ta debe boleche. Ta ekta nijer moddhey jodi jhonjhat bandhe ... dharun ami kono jayega theke ekta maal nichhi, amake ora dekeche aggey. Shei maal ta hoyto apni pelen, amake dekeche je korta, tar kach theke. Tokhon ami giye bollam amake dekeche apni nilen keno maal ta ...ei niye ekta eiye. Tapor nijeder moddhey abar thik hoye jaye. Ebar dekha gelo jake daklo maal ta dewar jonne sheykhane ar onno keu jete parey na mane onake dekeche uni-i nebe maal ta...ami jor korte parbo na eitai amader thik thake. (Problem as in, let me explain. For example, if you pick up the wares from a place where I was promised the ware, this will create problems amongst us. If I was getting the wares from a place and you got there first and you end up getting it instead of me from the 'korta' or the master who called me. So I claim I was called how could you take my wares? And a problem is created around this. Then again, it gets sorted amongst us. So usually we do not go to a place which has called someone else as that pheriwallah is supposed to get the wares and I can't force my way there. So this is an understanding we have.)
- Samiti tar kono naam ache ki? (Does the Samiti have a name?)
Samititar kono naam nei. (No, the samiti doesn't have a name.)
- Kojon ache?(How many of you are there?)
Amra ekhane ponero sholo jon miley achi (There are fifteen sixteen of us.)
- Kono leader ache? (Is there any leader?)
Leader...leader temon keu nei Leader bolte amra takei mani je dekha gelo shomoshya gulo dekhe ba dak master er jei prapyo mash gele sheta deye takei amra leader bole mani. Kintu amader ei bishoye kono meeting hoye na oto...otota eiye na just apni ghor diye berolen apnar moton apni kormo korlen apnar moton rojgar korey apni bari choleashlen, ei tai hochhe amader fact ar kichu noye. (Leader...there is no leader. We consider that person as a leader who we find takes care of our problem and at the end of the month gives the monthly payment to the 'dak-master' (I am not sure who that is) But we do not have any meetings regarding this and



it is not that important. Just that we leave the home, do our work and earn and then come back home. That is the fact and nothing else.)

One of the factors that often bind the pheriwallahs closely is not just their common trade but also their common native town. The kabaddiwallahs of Mahestala are all from Murshidabad and the pheriwallahs of Salt Lake are from Basirhat. The living conditions differed significantly between the two groups. While the former lived in a 'gumpti' which had dingy, windowless rooms with unhealthy living conditions, the slums in Salt Lake were furnished and had a television and refrigerator. The kabadiwallahs from Murshidabad have lived away from their families and live in dire poverty. They suffer from estrangement and destitution. The pheriwallahs of Salt Lake live in a much better condition directly reflecting the affluence of the area in which they trade. But squatting in 'unmapped' areas, their fear lay in the possibility of being evicted from that land. A question that I naturally raised, especially to the kabadiwallahs of Mahestala, was why did they not trade near their homes and why did they choose to come all the way to Kolkata? They responded by giving two reasons- firstly, they could earn more in the city rather than in their home town and secondly, some of them felt embarrassed to carry out this trade near their homes. A similar response speaking about 'lojja' (shame) was given by a pheriwallah I spoke to in Bansdronei who also travelled few hours by train every day to trade in Kolkata.

Intervention of the State

The presence of a systematic way of functioning and of organisation in one form or the other questions the notion of pheriwallah/wallihs being an integral part of the 'informal' population. Ananya Roy's three analytical findings on informality of third world countries hold true in case of the pheriwallahs. Firstly, the Pheriwallah/wallihs are indeed being increasingly brought within the regulation of the State. Secondly, the self-enterprising pheriwallah/wallihs that live and operate either individually or in clusters do indeed contribute to that informality which is 'a capitalist mode of production (of space), par excellence.' Thirdly, the mode of merchandising that makes the pheriwallah informal is in fact 'internally differentiated' since the 'formal' sector often adopts such means as well. (Roy 2003: xx-xxi)

For instance, ice-cream sellers like Kwality Walls, Mother Dairy and Amul have mobile carts and also hank to attract their clientele.



Similarly, representatives of certain companies go on door to door campaigns to market their products. They are usually referred to as 'Salesmen'. Shibani Apartment in Balia, Garia has a 'Salesman not allowed' written boldly on its wall. At the same time, talking to its second floor resident, Anurupa Mitra revealed that she and the other residents of that apartment were regular patrons of the pheriwallahs. So we find here an instance where one variation of the informal, the pheriwallah/wallihs, are preferred over the 'more formal' other-salesmen. Samit Kumar Ghosh, the resident of an individual house in Shyamapukur Street, Sovabazar mentioned how he sometimes hears the representatives from Bank of India, UCO Bank, Bank of Baroda advertise their bank using a microphone and roaming the streets in an auto.²¹ Companies that sell Chimneys or Aqua-guard or Lemon tea (Nestea) often set up temporary stalls on the pavement near Universities and metro stations although they are not usually identified as hawkers.

In fact, in agreement with Roy's argument, the urban elite willingly patronises these sellers and seldom look upon them with an eye of 'othering' (ibid.: xxi). Recent practices of buying goods online through a number of virtual stores have also blurred this distinction. How does one differentiate between an advertisement on 'ebay.in' and the Salt Lake pheriwallah's advertisement of his work on Just Dial? Perhaps the only point of difference lies in the fact that the door to door salespersons are agents of a bigger company while pheriwallah/wallihs are self-employed. But even this difference diffuses when sometimes the 'brands' being sold by these sales persons are turning out to be fraudulent ones raising a serious question on whether they are truly agents of a bigger concern or a variety of 'entrepreneurs' themselves!

In the recent years, the term 'street vendors' has been accepted as one that brings within its fold the pheriwallahs, the hawkers and any other kind of street peddler. The definition of this term has been given as the following,

A street vendor is broadly defined as a person who offers goods for sale to the public without having a permanent built up structure but with a temporary static structure or a mobile stall (for head load). Street vendors may be stationary by occupying space on the pavements or other public/private areas, or may be mobile in the sense that they move from place to place carrying their wares on the push carts or in cycles or baskets on their heads, or may sell their wares in moving trains, bus, etc. In the policy document (National Policy of Urban Street Vendors 2006), the term



urban vendor is inclusive of both traders and service providers, stationary as well as mobile vendors and incorporates all other local/region specific terms used to describe them, such as hawkers, pheriwallahs, rehri-patri, footpath dukandars, sidewalk traders etc.” (cit. in *ibid.*: xv, emphasis added).

But what needs to be examined is the possible implication of this process of including all kinds of vendors under one umbrella. At this juncture it is important to refer back to the differences between hawkers and pheriwallah/wallihs that I have touched upon earlier. To briefly summarize, the hawkers and the pheriwallah/wallihs are characteristically different from each other although the scope of transgressing from one to another is abundant and at times necessary for survival. With the tussle over semi-permanent to permanent space on the city streets, the stationary have sometimes chosen to become mobile while a favourable and lucrative spot on the pavement has made the mobile street vendor, stationary. But what differentiates them further is how they identify themselves. While the hawkers are organised in unions in order to assert their rights and aspirations, the pheriwallah/wallihs do not associate themselves with these unions. They operate either individually or they form their own organisations as is evident by the ‘gumpti’ system in Behala-Mahestala and the presence of samiti in Salt Lake.

The question of rights to the city has been rightfully posed by David Harvey, drawing from Henri Lefebvre’s concept. Harvey defines this right as “[...] far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanisation.”²² The pertinence of this right has been identified by the State recently and as a result the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act was introduced in May 2014. This act has been hailed as being pro-street vendor and has been claimed to have happened due to the constant efforts and agitation of the organisations, National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI) being one of the most important.

This Act is a culmination point of a long dialogue between the State and the informal sectors. Since the nineteenth century, street vending has been treated as a nuisance. The nature of this practise relegated it to the status of being almost anachronistic in a modern society. As a result, it was followed by one and a half century of constant tussle



between the State and the Street Vendors.²³ From 1960s onwards, the State changed its attitude towards the informal economy from a negative to an interventionist one.²⁴ In 1977, the first survey of the informal sector was conducted in India. In 2001, the Government of India formed a National Task Force for Street Vendors. Based on a feedback of the Drafting Committee that represented several street vendor associations and Government officials, the first draft of the National Policy of Street Vendors was created and it was made public in 2004. In the same year the Government set up a National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) for the purpose of policy making on the informal sector. Based on the recommendations of this Commission the draft was revised and published in 2006.²⁵ It was in this recommendation that the idea of Town Vending Committees was first suggested. Based on the recommendation of this Commission, the policy was revised in 2009.

This policy was followed by the introduction of the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Bill in 2012 that was enacted in 2014. The ambiguity of the previous policy which allowed room for misuse and ad hoc implementation of the 'town vending zone' clause created a need for the more comprehensive legislation.²⁶ The Bill intends to provide a more 'conducive' environment and a dedicated space to carry out their business. It also suggests the creation of Town Vending Authorities whose responsibility would be to conduct surveys of all existing street vendors and issue certificates of street vending. Based on this survey, identified street vendors would be allotted space in Town Vending Zones. The Bill also attempts to protect the street vendors from the Police and other authorities by providing a clause to override previously existing penal laws.²⁷

These attempts were aimed at providing a workable solution in which the interests of the street vendors are protected and at the same time the conflicting claims to public space is somewhat resolved. The creation of 'vending zones' in the city has been identified as one such solution. What is significant is that while in its scope this Act recognizes and differentiates between mobile and stationary vendors, in its resolution it fails to identify the characteristic difference in the mode of operation of the two kinds of vendors. The National Policy of Urban Street Vendors, 2009 (in the points 1.6 and 4.2 d) gave adequate scope for mobile street vendors to carry out their trade except in strictly restricted regions. It recognised the need of the mobile street vendors to be in the audible reach and in the visibility range of the



buyers on the street and in their residence for their modus operandi. But the 2014 Act curbs much of that right by introducing the clause of licencing. The introduction of vending certificates and licenses essentially throttles the 'Right to livelihood' of the Street Vendors.

The lack of expediency of licensing can be demonstrated in two instances that I encountered during my field work. Laboni Abashan, a Housing Co-operative in Salt Lake regulates the entry of street vendors within its housing area by having fixed hours and allowing only certain street vendors that are given a license by this Co-operative to enter. However, a brief interview with the security personnel at the gate revealed that they make exceptions for certain pheriwallahs that are in demand but few in number, for instance, 'Silkatao' (mender of the old fashioned spice grinder), in fear that licensing discourages them. Similarly, a pheriwallah in Bansdrone revealed in an interview that when asked to submit his identity documents to the police he refused as he feared that it would facilitate harassment by the police.

Another cause of concern is the absence of prominent unions among pheriwallahs. The provision of forming Town Vending Authorities, which is the fulcrum of the 2014 Act, requires the inclusion of the representatives of local hawker associations leaving the pheriwallah without a scope to represent them. This aggravates their chances of getting more and more side-lined to the better informed hawkers. As I have already mentioned, the Act fails to even recognise the Pheriwallah as requiring separate arrangements more conducive to the trade itself and without the space to articulate their separate needs, it essentially forces most of these pheriwallahs to either become stationary against their wishes or leave the trade, being unable to afford the transition.

The regulatory aspect of the 2014 legislation in that sense overshadows the privilege granting sections of it. On one hand, the need of the State to enumerate this informal population is quite evident. On the other hand, creation of vending zones greatly facilitates the process of partitioning spaces within the city that is already being partitioned by the modular housing projects. The pheriwallahs that already live a ghettoed existence are now being excluded from the 'gated' spaces within the city and being slowly pushed into trading in another set of ghettoed areas in the name of town vending zone, where their mode of merchandising is not being accommodated. The Act is not only exclusionary in its formulation but also exclusionary in its spirit.



Without taking into consideration the difficulties faced by the street vendors, the challenges posed by the transforming built environment, the growing 'urban fear' and the differences in the means of trading of the various street vendors, the usefulness of this legislation is seriously questionable.

Scope for further research

The questions that I have raised in this article are only the first steps in any kind of research pertaining to the pheriwallah/wallihs' lives. The lack of awareness among the pheriwallahs of Kolkata regarding this legislation or any of the previous ones needs to be taken into account. Also their complete obliviousness to the fact that their trade is part of a formal political discussion too needs to be considered. What also needs to be clarified is that, the interviews have not taken a sufficiently large group into account to be able to represent the heterogeneity of the entire region. Neither does it completely capture the variegated nature of the residents of Kolkata. In case of the pheriwallahs, often the experiences differed depending on the trade they were engaged in. This aspect has only been touched upon here and has scope for further research. There has also been a significant absence of pheriwallihs or female mobile street vendors from the group of my respondents. I have been unable to interview them directly in this study and have only learnt about them through interviews with the residents.

There is much scope of conducting more interviews of the pheriwallahs - differentiating them by the commodity they sell, the strategies they adopt for selling and the routes they choose for roaming and clarifying whether a pattern in the topography of the buildings can be observed based on these variables. Also, emphasis needs to be given to lives of the pheriwallihs and their experiences and the methods by which they counteract the troubles that they face while trading. In fact, this study has concentrated on the interaction that takes place in the living spaces of the city. The other spaces within the city that I had identified at the beginning such as traffic junction, moving vehicles and tourist spots also need to be studied. Further investigation also needs to be made into the potency of the samitis, 'gumpti' system and other such existing local organisations.

What needs to be further interrogated is the underlying theme of suspicion. On one hand there is the suspicion of the pheriwallah/wallihs of the hostile clientele, demanding police officers and unco-



operative security personnels. On the other hand, there is increasing suspicion of the residents of the city of the 'strangers' lurking near their houses and apartments. The varying roles of the 'Mahajan', especially as the middleman needs to be taken into account and their significance to this trade also needs to be assessed. The extent to which the personal networks of the pheriwallahs with points of contacts like the security personnel are effective also needs to be explored.

Endnotes

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² The aberrations refer to penal laws against Street Vendors that will be discussed subsequently in this article.

³ The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014.

⁴ The involvement of the State in this matter includes both its legislative role, which in recent years has been pro-active (as I shall discuss subsequently) and its executive one as has been realised in terms of police- street vendor relationship, which has mostly remained antithetical.

⁵ I have mostly used Pheriwallah/wallihs to signify the whole group of traders, including male and female. Since my group of respondents included pheriwallahs (male) only, when talking about them as respondents, I shall mention pheriwallahs only.

⁶ Some of the questions included in the questionnaire were as following:

For the Pheriwallah/wallihs: What route do you follow? How many years have you been in this trade? What issues do you face? Are you harassed by the police? Do you have an union or other similar organisations for your trade?

For the Residents: What kind of Pheriwallah/wallihs have you seen in this area? Do you think they have increased in numbers since your childhood (if the childhood was also spent in Kolkata)? For what goods and services do you depend on them?

For Security Personnel: Are pheriwallah/wallihs allowed inside the Complex/Co-operatives? If so, are their fixed hours designated to them? Is there any system of identity cards? Do the residents request for the entry of particular Pheriwallah/wallihs?

⁷ Just Dial is an electronic commerce platform that connects providers of several consumer services and end users of these services through telephone and the internet.

⁸ Seta Low (Low 2001: 49-51) discusses this method at length and speaks about how it is useful for penetrating communities that are otherwise impenetrable. In her research, she uses this method for Gated Communities.

⁹ In this project, I have chosen to concentrate on the pheriwallah/wallihs that trade in the residential spaces because it their most important stronghold.

¹⁰ Notes from my field survey

¹¹ Here I refer to the definition used in the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014.

¹² The details of location of these temporary residences have been omitted to protect the interviewees.



¹³ Name has not been disclosed here to protect the identity of the pheriwallah.

¹⁴ The interview was recorded and later transcribed.

¹⁵ This was an instance where I failed to win the trust of the Pheriwallah. The situation unfolded in the following manner. I first bought couple of his wares and then requested him for an interview to which he responded favourably. However, in the act of buying and selling, I used a five hundred rupee note for a purchase amount of seventy rupees. When he returned the change to me, the resident, of the house in whose doorstep the exchange was taking place, asked me in a suspicious tone if I had counted the money. This evidently offended the Pheriwallah who felt that the resident was being suspicious of him and immediately he became suspicious of my intentions of interviewing him and his answers thereafter were mostly guarded.

¹⁶ Name changed to protect respondent

¹⁷ Name changed on request

¹⁸ This term was used by the pheriwallahs themselves.

¹⁹ This term was used by the pheriwallah himself.

²⁰ He was a graduate who had studied B.A. Arts in a College in Sealdah, Kolkata.

²¹ The mode being strikingly similar to that of the Pheriwallah I encountered in Banskroni who claimed it was the voice of the Mahajan being used electronically.

²² Harvey, David. 2008. Right to the City. *New Left Review* 53, pp. 23-40
<http://newleftreview.org/II/53/david-harvey-the-right-to-the-city> [retrieved 30.10.2015]

²³ Anjaria, Jonathan Shapiro. 2014. How we define the Street. *The Indian Express*.
<http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/how-we-define-the-street> [retrieved 19. 09. 2015]

²⁴ N.n. 2012, Final Report - National Workshop on Debating the national policy of the urban street vendors, a trans-city interrogation, Urban Research and Policy Programme National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore

<http://www.nias.res.in/docs/urpp/NIAS-URPP-Workshop-on-Urban-Street-Vendors-Policy-Final-Report.pdf> [retrieved 19. 09. 2015]

²⁵ N.n. 2012, Final Report - National Workshop on Debating the national policy of the urban street vendors, a trans-city interrogation, Urban Research and Policy Programme National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore

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²⁷ N.n. 2014. Street Vendors Bill passed in Rajya Sabha, *The Hindu*.

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