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Role of NGOs and Street Vendors' Union in Safeguarding Street Vending Activities in Urban Areas of Assam

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Abstract:

Street play an important role in developing countries like India. Street vending is indispensable of informal sector and they are mostly visible in urban areas of India. Street vending is treated as illegal trade and moreover, government treats the street vendors as 'encroachers' in most of the countries in the world. They basically come from poor section and rural migrants are also seen in adopting street trade as a source of livelihood in all the developing and underdeveloped economies. Unfortunately, their economic importance cannot be ignored so far as employment generation, income earning etc are concerned. In India, a Street vendor Act was introduced by the union government in 2014 to regulate the activities of street vendors and to protect the interest of street vendors. In practice, urban administration is hostile to the street traders and often they harass, evict and threaten the street vendors.

The magnitude of urban street vendors is mounting up in Assam in recent years and it has been posing a threat to the district administrators, policy makers, commuters and so on. The study takes into account of 400 sample urban street vendors in three municipal cities of Guwahati, Tezpur and Jorhat of Assam (India) to deal with certain core issues of sample urban street vendors of Assam. More specifically, the paper has attempted to deal with the status the viability of street vending business in urban areas of Assam, India.

Key words: Street vendors, rural migrants, informal sector, street trade, encroachers.

Introduction: Street vendors are more visible components of total population and trading part in urban localities. In fact, they form one of the main segments of the self-employed workers (Dendukuri, 2014). The self-employed people can be divided into two categories viz. self-employed people belonging to high and middle income groups and self-employed people of lower income group. The lower income self-employed people include a number of sections of workers where street vendors are also one of them.

A section of rural migrants and the urban poor section adopt street vending as an easy option of livelihood in developing and underdeveloped countries. The contribution and the

share of street vending activities to urban informal sector cannot be ruled out all over the world (Tamirat and Nega, 2015). Due to downsizing, merger or closure of the units in the early 90s, many people are forced to join into informal sector including street business activities (Bhowmik, 2006; Saha, 2010). Over the years, continuous and heavy influxes of people from rural to urban areas are taking place in order to get employment and earn income. Consequently, most of the migrants as well as urban poor adopt street vending business in the cities.

National Commission on Labour defines street vendors as those self-employed workers in the informal sector who offer their labour for selling goods and services on the street without having any permanent built-up structure. Street vendor refers to a person who offers goods for sale to the public at large without having a permanent built-up structure from which to sale (Bhowmik, 2006).

Street vendors play a dual role in urban economy because they are helping the urban poor by providing cheap food and service. They also help some customers with some essential items which are supplied neither by the municipalities nor the big retail outlets (Bhowmik, 2005). A section of urban poor, slum dwellers and lower middle class living in the city avail fresh food and non-food articles at low and affordable price ((Kanth, 2000; Njaya, 2014).

Objectives: The objective of the study is to explain the role of NGOs and vendors' union in safeguarding street vending activities in urban areas of Assam.

Methodology: The study is an empirical study based upon primary data. It covers 400 samples urban street vendors i.e 200 samples from Guwahati, 100 samples each from Tezpur and Jorhat municipal cities of Assam. The samples include both stationary and mobile vendors and both male and female vendors. Samples are classified into eight distinct categories as shown in Table-1 revealing the sample framing by category of work performed by sample traders. The study adopts convenience sampling and descriptive statistics to test the hypothesis and achieve the objectives of the study.

Table-1: Activity wise distribution of sample street traders

Sample Vendors	Vegetable	Fruit	Fish	Meat	Stationary	Food	Garment	Service	Total
Number	79	52	53	28	46	88	37	17	400
Percentage	19.75	13	13.25	7	11.5	22	9.25	4.25	100

Review of Literature: More than 60% of urban dwellers depend upon urban street vendors in Dhaka, Bangladesh (Hasan and Alam, 2015). It provides a source of income and employment to a class of rural and urban poor. Sometimes incomes from the street vending business are relatively higher than those from other informal sectors. In Thailand, street vending is not only a choice for the urban poor, but it is considered as a prime and attractive means of sustenance for the educated middle class (Kusakabe, 2006; Saha, 2011; Ndhlovu, 2011).The youth in Sub-Saharan Africa have been increasingly engaged in the informal

sector to enhance their livelihoods (Joseph, 2011). In India, street vending formed 11 per cent of urban employment and 14 percent of urban informal employment during 2009-10 (Economic Survey, 2010-11). There has been a phenomenal growth in the employment of informal sector in India since 1970s (Dendukuri, 2014). Street trade has gained economic importance after the introduction of economic reforms, 1991.

Urban street vendors are vulnerable to abuse and harassment from public officials, frequent raids and confiscation of their goods since they do not possess vending license (Bhowmik, 2005; Berry, 2009; Njaya, 2014). They have non-cordial and hostile relation with the police which is acute in the over-populated cities like metropolitan city of Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata etc. Mobile street vendors move from one street to another or one place to another place of the same street to get rid of police patrolling and their atrocities. They become more vulnerable to natural calamities, unfavourable weather conditions and accidents in the workplace (Tamirat and Nega, 2015).

Analysis and Findings of the Study:

Role of non-government organizations (NGOs) and street vendors' union and street vendors: The International Labour Organization (ILO) has recognized the rights of workers and employers to form their independent organization in order to protect and safeguard their interest by organizing joint activities and participating in negotiations and discussions affecting these interests (ILO, 2000). In India, a large section of workers are employed as wage earners and agricultural labourers, self-employed workers and employees in other informal sectors. Moreover, incomes of these groups are low. In most of the cities of India, street vendors are united themselves to form a number of unions to protect their interest. In this context, member-based organizations would be more realistic in the countries like India. In India, the National Policy for Street Vendors recognizes the role of trade unions and other voluntary associations of street vendors in making street vending activities a success. The Policy recommends that town vending committees (TVCs) to take steps to facilitate the formation and smooth functioning of such organizations.

Street vendors' union provides the street vendors a common platform to fight for their rights and thereby helps the street vendors to solve their problems. In fact, trade unions are essential to protect their rights as well as ensure safety and security in the workplace. "Member based organizations also help in creating economic opportunities and improve the livelihoods of street vendors" (Abbot and Sotelo, 2014). They can intervene in various stages of policy formulation. They assist in negotiating with local authorities and local police stations for which street vendors can access public space to carry out their business activities smoothly. For the welfare and betterment of the street vendors, vendors' organizations can put pressure to the government for set up of welfare boards (Bhowmik, 2006 ; Saha, 2014 ; Njaya, 2016). Street vendors' union can put adequate pressure to the concern authorities for issuing licences to all existing street vendors, to legalise their street vending business and ensure long term sustainability and safety at the workplace.

Street vendors' union across various countries and India: In underdeveloped and developing countries, street vendors are failed to form unions because majority of them are not aware of their rights. In Ghana, although a street vendors' association succeeded in convincing the government to exempt street vendors from payment of value added tax (VAT), most of them fail to minimise their hardships only due to the absence of unions. Similarly, street vendors' unions are not obtaining adequate financial aid from the government for undertaking various developmental activities including the maintenance of hygienic condition in the vending zones in many countries. For instance, there is no such collaboration of these unions with the institutional credit organizations such as Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI), state financial corporations (SFCs) etc in India. Instead of forming formal association or union, street vendors basically prefer to pay rent to the municipality, police or concern authorities to render business activities on the streets and pavements. The strength of these unions tends to be weak due to such indifferent attitude of a section of street vendors towards forming associations (Bhowmik, 2006).

In South Africa, there are some prominent associations serving for the interest of street vendors which include the Queenstown Hawkers Association, Pretoria Informal Business Association (PIBA), Cape Town Deck Traders Association, Gompo etc. The Street Net International is another international association working for the street vendors. The PIBA imparts training to the street vendors to improve their business skills (Mitullah, 2005). In the allotment of business sites to street vendors and enforcement of regulations, the Association plays an active role. Similarly, the role of Street Net and other few associations in Durban (South Africa) can not be underestimated in the introduction of national law for street vendors (Roever, 2014).

In South Korea, National Federation of Korean Street Vendors (NFKSV), a national alliance was formed by the street vendors of Korea to get rid of constant harassment from the authorities, police and so on (Dendukuri, 2014). The Federation (NFKSV) played a leading role in addressing various issues and problems of street vendors in Seoul and other parts of the country. Similarly, street vendors' unions perform many functions in Mexico. They act as negotiators and street vendors choose to become members of these organizations as a means to get rid of complex bureaucratic interference. Unions also render as managers of social assets and manage conflicts among vendors. On the other hand, the Cebu City United Vendors Association (CCUVA) formed in 1984, is the framework of street vendor associations in Philippines. Being the umbrella organization, the CCUVA renders as a permanent representative towards the local government in Philippines and manages all the smaller vendor organizations in the country (Destombes, 2010).

In India, there are some street vendors' unions such as Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA), National Hawkers Federation (NHF) etc. who have been working for the interest of street vendors over the years. They conduct consultancy and advocacy programmes all over India. They have played a leading role in the creation of Model Act and the Street Vendors Policy of 2004, 2009 and 2014 (Sadaf, 2014). The National

Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI), a leading street vendors' union, played a pioneering role to bring about a national policy for street vendors in India.

In Ahmedabad, nearly 40% of the total street vendors constitute female and they are highly unionised due to the efforts of the Self-Employed Womens Association (SEWA), a pioneer street vendors' union in India. The SEWA encourages the female street vendors who are basically urban poor and face comparatively more economic hardship and legal challenges. The association regularly provides a number of supportive and advisory services such as child care, insurance, health care, legal advice, micro credit etc. to its members. Ahmedabad is the only city where the male vendors have the lowest level of unionisation (Bhowmik, 2006). Besides, NASVI and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), the SEWA is one of the leading organisations which played an active and prominent role in the formulation of National policy on Street Vendors in India.

In Surat, Gujarat Shramik Hawkers Sangathan (GSHS) is a registered association of street vendors which is working for the greater interest of street vendors of the state (Garg and Garg, 2014). With the help of SEWA, the Sangathan (association) makes attempt to unite all the women street vendors in Surat. Shramjeevi, a leading non-government organization (NGO) in Surat, have been primarily working for the interest of street vendors and it provides suggestions and support measures to the street vendors of the city. Street vendors' unions are helpful in adopting device for keeping on the streets to run their business without any hardship. Moreover, such unions also play a diversified role by extending its supportive services such as credit support, health care etc. More specifically, to solve the health problems of street vendors, the SEWA undertakes certain health programmes for its members and renders some other allied services like promotion of NGOs and cooperatives in channelising institutional credit facilities to the members. It extends services in imparting minimum health care education among its members. NIDAN, a Patna-based union of street vendors, has been providing many services to the street vendors of Bihar apart from rendering provision for group insurance, training programmes to enhance the business skill of street vendors, to improve business relation with customers and so on.

In Kolkata, nearly 96% street vendor's union extend assistance to their members and other street vendors. Recently street vendors are included in the pension schemes of the unorganised sector by the West Bengal government. Sometimes they tend to form informal unions to negotiate with the local authorities to address a wide range of issues such as bribes to the authorities, to avoid certain harassment like eviction drive or to pre-inform them before eviction and so on. In Mysore, a community based organization known as Vivekananda Institute for Leadership Development (V-LEAD) undertakes various initiatives for welfare of street vendors in the city. The organization helps in forming self-help groups (SHGs) among the street vendors and conduct awareness programme among them. The formation of SHGs among the street vendors helps in developing banking habits among the street vendors and reduces their excessive dependence on money-lenders and building their economic strength.

In Delhi, most of the trade unions working for the street vendors have been serving in association with NASVI although few of them are not interested in becoming NASVI's member. Delhi Hawker's Welfare Association, Akhil Bhartiya Pawan Putra Indraprastha Rehri Patri Saptahik Bazaar Hawker Morcha, Balaji Rehri Patri Association, Rehri Patri & Hawker's Association, Rehri Patri Kalyan Prehari, Delhi Tehabajari Holder's Union, Jai Hind Rehri Patri Hawker's Association, Adarsh Nagar Vyapar Mandal, Indraprastha Swabhimani Rehri Patri Union & Pawan Putra Rehri Patri Khomcha Sangh, Shree Ram Bazaar Association are few trade unions which have been rendering various services for the street vendors in Delhi. They have representation in the zonal and ward vending committees in Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) which work for the implementation of the National policy of street vendors in Delhi. These associations are continuously fighting for the legal rights of the street vendors and raise voice against the harassment from the police and MCD officials (Bhowmik and Saha, 2012).

In Bhubaneswar, NASVI, All Orissa Roadside Vendors' Association (AORVA) and Nikhil Utkal Khyudra Byabasayee Mahasangha (NUKBM) have played a pioneering role in negotiating and implementing the concept of vending zone in the city. They have fought a long battle before which the Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation (BMC) was pursued to go for creation of model markets for street vendors (Kumar and Singh, 2009). The NASVI organized the vendors all across the Bhubaneswar when eviction drive by BMC was at the peak. Moreover, a number of huge rallies against the hostile policies of BMC were organized by NASVI which led to violent clashes. NASVI and other unions widely circulated magazines like "Footpath ki Awaz" (voice of the pavement), Peta Garjan (the roar of stomach) etc all over Bhubaneswar city to make the street vendors aware of their rights. Subsequently, many vending zones have been set up by the BMC in Bhubaneswar (Efroymsen, 2015).

Street vendors' union and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) in Assam: Over last few years, a number of organizations have been working for the rights of street vendors in Guwahati and other cities of Assam. Since 2002, the Society for Social Transformation and Environment Protection (sSTEP) has been playing a pioneering role in organizing the street vendors. Similarly, sSTEP is supporting the street vendors to fight for their rights. Greater Guwahati Street Vendors Association (GGSVA) and Greater Guwahati Women Vegetable Vendors Association (GGWVVA) are another two leading organizations who are working for the interest of the street vendors in Guwahati. All Assam Street Vendors Association (ASVA) is the state level association of the street vendors in Assam. All these associations are guided by sSTEP and NASVI and international organizations like Action Aid, Oxfam and Indo-Global Social Service Society (Mahadevia *et al.*, 2016). Assam Street Vendors Association (ASVA) is an active and strong organization, registered in 2014, fighting for vulnerable street vendors of Assam. Many advocacy programmes have been conducted by the ASVA on various issues of street vendors including social security of the street vendors. Organizations such as sSTEP, Action Aid have been conducting various capacity building and enhancement of leadership quality programmes for the welfare of

street vendors in Assam. Scorpion, another important NGO, conducted a base survey of number of street vendors in all municipal wards of Guwahati on behalf of the municipal corporation of Guwahati (GMC). Similarly, in Lakhra (Guwahati), a Unnayan Samiti (development committee) known as the Khipinijal Dehalpuja Aru Bazar Unnayan Samiti pays a sum of Rs.10,000 as tax to the GMC every quarter and collects charges from the street vendors and the Unnayan Samiti maintains lighting, cleanliness and other developmental activities in the market (sSTEP,2013). Similarly, Garchuk Milan Sangh, a local youth club, manages the Garchuk market and collects charges from street vendors (sSTEP, 2013).

In order to protect the street vendors from eviction and other harassment in Guwahati, the Greater Guwahati Hawkers Association filed a petition in Guwahati High Court in 1996. Accordingly, the honourable court directed the state government and Guwahati Municipal Corporation to stop all eviction related activities. The SS Road Hawkers Association (Guwahati) lodged a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in 2010 to draw attention of the High Court to the GMC's failure in implementing the well-meaning provisions of the National Policy for Urban Street Vendors, 2009.

Conclusion: The study concludes that the role of non-government organizations (NGOs) and other voluntary organizations in reducing continuous eviction and harassment of the street vendors in Assam is enormous. The activities of voluntary and community based organizations which are working for the interest of street vendors of Assam are gradually expanding although the rights and interest of the street vendors of the state are not protected and secured.

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