Autobiography, Archiving and Everyday
The Hawkers' Question in Calcutta

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In the first half of 2014, the hawker, as we know of various petty traders on the streets and footpaths of cities, or, the 'street vendor', as we know of the hawker in a more formalized world of urban policy, came to receive much media attention in the dual effect of the passing of the Street Vendors Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending Act (SVA) in both the Houses of the Indian Parliament and in the celebration of Prime Minister Narendra Miodi's exceptional career that began as the *chaiwalah*—the ordinary urban everyman. Modi's party—the BJP—led a successful campaign connecting hundreds of tea stalls across the country through digital media. Modi interacted with the larger public across the country in the interface of digital media and the 'traditional' tea stall—the much touted 'informal' platform for political opinion formation in India. The entire campaign was also given a brand-name: *Chai pe Charcha*. The structural connection between the new law that protects the livelihood of the street vendors by restricting their spheres of activity in different zones, and Modi's official celebration of the hawker as the Ordinary for whom he stands, is still not very clear to us, but we may say that if the SVA brings in some amount of certainty to the tenuous existence of one segment of the lower rung of the growing petty bourgeois elements in Indian urban scene, the Modi campaign, with its promise to protect small-scale retail from FDI, introduced a new political universal—it is not the peasant or the working class or even the middle class of the 20th century with whom India's Prime Minister identifies himself through autobiographical reckoning—it is a new national category that associates itself with the street of the 21th century's fast urbanizing India while the new Act on street vendors gives the category a spatio-temporal uniformity across the national spectrum.

The decade-long public deliberations on the Street Vendors Act has left at least four significant legacies that would continue to shape the politics of street hawking in the post-Act era. First, it signals a concerted effort from the Indian state to govern the so-called informal economy in general

and to integrate the street vendors' question with concerns regarding urban spatial planning[1]. Second, it has augmented the pace of association formation among the street hawkers. My evidence hints at the formation of new social-group specific unions within NHF along the Act's mandate to have representations from women[2], Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This also suggests that the vocabulary of the association might undergo some changes in course of the actual implementation of the Act. Third, the promulgation of 'public sector'-like reservation norms in managing the hawkers' representation in the TVC and the treatment of street hawking as a transitory employment-bank seem to suggest a greater access of the government in structuring street hawking. Fourth, the Act formally resolves a central paradox associated with any kind of formal recognition to the "stationary" street vendors. The paradox is as follows: how is it possible to give formal recognition to the *privatization of the public space*? At least from 1989 the judiciary has remained fairly consistent in its opinion[3]. The members of the public can rightfully use them as a fact of right which is balanced and constrained by the similar rights of the other members of the public. The State as trustee on behalf of the public has to protect all such rights of the public by imposing constraints on every user of the street. Under what consideration can the hawker be allowed to occupy space on streets in violation of the basic "public purpose" of it? Arguably then, it is the spatial aspect and not the trade aspect of street hawking that comes under *general* state regulation. The Street Vendors Act is thus much more concerned with the sedentary hawkers than the nomads and ensures that the sedentary hawker does not develop a long-term legal claim on the space of vending through the erection of any kind of permanent/semi-permanent structures. What is going to happen to the political posture of the law-bringing, law-implementing and law-abiding street hawkers' associations that *once placed themselves with the promise of transgressing the rule of property justifying violation as a moral claim*[4]?

Before I ender the main theme of my presentation, let me mention that this surge for the nationalization of the hawker has been preceded by a certain internationalization of the category since the early 1970s at the behest of the ILO. As we all know, and therefore, I don't intend to go

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[1] This is not to deny the existence of zoning norms in many cities during the colonial and postcolonial times. In 1935, for instance, the Bombay Municipal Corporation imposed prohibition on 'hawker nuisance' in certain important streets. For details, see an elaborate report by Times of India on 5 January, 1935. Having said this, I should mention that such norms were often city specific and there was hardly any correspondence among cities.
[2] Women Hawkers Adhikar Sangram Committee was founded in Calcutta in 2012.
[3] See Sodan Singh Etc. Etc vs New Delhi Municipal Committee & ... on 30 August, 1989 (AIR 1988, 1989 SCR (3)1038).
[4] Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflexions of Popular Politics in Most of the World*, Ranikhet, Permanent Black, 2004.

details of its intellectual genealogy, ILO's buzzword of documentation and intervention in the labour regimes in the developing world has been the Informal Sector—an immensely heterogeneous negative opposite of the unionized formal sector. Numerous studies that documented structures of employment and labour condition in such cities, sponsored by the ILO and its critique, used the category of the informal economy as the starting point and found smooth and automatic translation of the act of street hawking as one of many instances of the informal economy. What the booming informal economy research sought to achieve was, in my view, two fold. First, it developed an ethico-legal approach and distinguished between purely illegal "underground" economy and what Casteills and Portes (1989) later termed as 'unregulated production of otherwise licit goods and services'. Such a nuanced analytical separation between illicit and illegal in defining informal sector gradually morphed into two ideologically opposite, but, equally celebrated formulations in their respective circles. The first was the legalist approach of H D Soto that held that participants in the informal economy were throbbing with enterprise and that they just needed the legal titles from the state to activate their "dead capital". The second was the political theoretic intervention that explained the layered conversation among the notions of property (and thereby the bourgeois law), community, and democracy in a postcolonial setup. In South Asia, this approach gained immense recognition as Partha Chatterjee started publishing a series of articles and books since the late 1990s on what he called the "political society".

Another distinct line of argumentation on informal sector derived from the old dualism and modernization frameworks. But, the informal sector literature clubbed the dualism framework with another tradition of economic accounting where an attempt is made to describe the economic structure in terms of the flows of input and output between sectors. A lot of studies on economic informality thus focused on the linkages between the formal and the informal sectors, backward and forward linkages of a particular economic enterprise, resource transfer from the informal to the formal economy, asymmetric relation between the two sectors of the economy and the insertion of the contribution of the informal economy to the national accounting system.

In sum, both the ethico-legal and economic approaches to informality produced an impressive corpus of literature. Already by the late 1990s some of the more influential terms such as "low circuit economy", "service sector" etc, in this literature seeped into the language of activism. The

interpenetration among the world of policy, academe and activism was so intense in some cities that by the early 2000s academe became part of the hawkers' entire archival negotiation.

I have shown elsewhere that the naturalization of street vending into the informal economy happened in the three decades following the invention of the term. Calcutta was one of the first few cities where the gobality of informality acquired empirical substance and the local falvour in the continuing practices of street vending. The term hawker or the street vendor also acquired empirical coherence as informal economy become the doxic commonsense around which questions regarding the urban condition in the 'South' started to be framed. In the colonial archive of Calcutta, the term hawker appears along with other similar terms such as pavement sellers and pheriwala. The hawker emerged in Calcutta's everyday language of conversation in the post-partition era when the state government initiated economic rehabilitation projects for refugees by building a number of "hawker corners" in the city. Much of the city's retail expansion in the refugee dominated areas took place with the establishment and stabilization of these hawkers' corners. These retail corners came under Markets Regulation Act, but retained their specific history in the names. Even then, if you ask someone who saw Calcutta between 1950s and 1970s would tell you that the term hawker or even the *pheriwala* (*pheriweali* for female vendor) was not a common term to refer to one trader on the pavement. They were rather called in association with their activity and the services that they offered—thus, *phalwala* (fruit seller), *basanwala* (utensils seller), *machwala* (fish seller), etc. All these specific terms had a double meaning. A *phalwala*, for instance, could be sedentary--sitting regularly at a particular location, or nomadic—traversing a particular rout at a regular interval.

II

I am currently writing a book. The book is titled *Paving the Informal: The Hawkers' Question in Postcolonial Calcutta.* It tells us three connected stories, each of which is a critical commentary of the SVA and the dominant assumptions about the informal economy and its politics: a) the story of the footpath as a social space—the Act defines the street vendor without defining the street; b) the story of collectivization in the political and economic management of hawking—something that I have called institutionalization of informality in which territorial control becomes a central theme rather than the clichéd vote-bank thesis; judicialization of the organized mobilization becomes as important as the everyday collective transgression of law. While talking of the institutional I try to go beyond the long-standing anthropological tradition of looking into the "informal and the interstitial".

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Rather, I track the everyday life of papers, documents and written records. In theoretical terms, then, my work is situated in recent trends in social science to re-materialize the social. But, unlike the dominant orthodoxy in this literature, I do not write on the bureaucracy per se. I write on the institutional practices within popular movements; c) the story of the archive as an active space of negotiation between the government and population groups.   In this case I combine the conventional historical method of looking *through* the archive with the archival turn in anthropology that invites us to look *at* the archive.

In sum, the book is a small history of mass political formation in contemporary urban India. This is also a book on the footpath hawkers of Calcutta. It traces how the hawkers have navigated a changing world, how they have experienced and negotiated that change, and how the histories of the market and the state are closely connected to the saga of their everyday lives.

In this presentation, I have decided to talk on the footpath and the archive. I do not intend to go into the organized mobilization of the hawkers and the organizational politics of the HSC. I leave all that for another occasion. I guess, Koyel's presentation after me will throw some light on the contemporary dimensions of the story.

III

I start with a fairly conventional historical question. What escapes the archive? We know archive is linked to the death drive: we record what we annihilate (thankful to Bodhisattva Kar for an illuminating discussion). How can there be an archive of the footpath which is everyday not only in the empirical sense of the term, but also in the sense that Lefebvre (1991) gives it: it is that uneven terrain of the familiar and the unperceived where unspectacular negotiations of the widest questions of meaning and power can continue? Moreover, there is more particular spin in the case of the footpath because the street in a bourgeois city represents and acts out a principle of architectural order through which the cityscape is neatly structured between private buildings and public spaces.

The footpath escapes notice as it is out there. It is everyday in the sense that it belongs to a realm where to borrow from Maurice Blanchot (1959) "there is still nothing to know, just as it is prior to all relation insofar as it has always already been said, even while remaining unformulated, that is to say, not yet information". The moment of the footpath then dodges the time that we generally

associate with history—"history as the selective accumulation of facts". How can the historian's craft of accumulation respond to the expenditure of the living? Is it possible to write a history of the footpath without monumentalizing it?

My entry point is through an old puzzle: how to study the everyday historically which involves as Braudel reminds us in the Preface to his *Structures of Everyday Life: The Limits of the Possible* "the difficult assembling of a number of *parahistoric* languages". By parahistoric, Braudel means the registers such as demography, food, housing, costume, technology, money, and towns that "develop in the margin of traditional history". In Braudel, the metaphor of margin and its incarnations such as frontier and limit is of pivotal importance. Remember the subtitle of the book – "The Limits of the Possible." The footpath in our case is a margin—a line where two different paradigms of navigation are made to distinguish each other. From this tectonic fault line is born the modern pedestrian—the urban everyman. Around the pedestrian is born the shop-keeper, the hawker, the traffic guard, and the ethnographer-historian who observes the street and is observed by all. I specify my project to the rediscovery of the connections and encounters that at specific conjunctures establish what subsequently comes to be self-evident in the construction of the everyday, the street, the pedestrian, the hawker, the informal economy, the pavement dweller and so forth. I consider archive to be the site where the self-evidence is produced. I show how the hawkers, for example, were invented as constituting Calcutta's informal economy in the friction of various global and local forces in the early 1970s. I study the ways in which hawkers, by arrogating themselves to a sort of information practice of self-representation through surveys and preservation of data on individual members of an umbrella organization of several registered and unregistered unions called the Hawker Sangram Committee comes to intervene in the larger public discourses on the "rightful" use of the urban space in such a way that the empirical existence of the pavement dweller makes an exit in the debate on the use of the footpath where hawker is seen to either cooperate or collude with the classless-nameless-anonymous pedestrian. They invent an entire *cosmos* where the claim of the hawker on space becomes a claim to enter the society's structures of obligation: "we are here as poor pedestrians require us to be here. We are also here to create the pedestrian"—says the hawker. This answers how a study of footpath becomes a study of the hawker and the pedestrian—each mirrors the image of the other. I keep three issues in mind when I associate the term archive with the HSC's production of data: a) the hawkers' ability to resist the ethnographer as the "Other" and to control the flow of information from below, b) the HSC's understanding of the political nature of records,

and c) its ability to produce governmental information, use records in what I call the state-union complex and regulate *what can be said* on footpath hawking that eventually leads to the decline of the pavement dweller as a governmental category in the 1990s and 2000s.

Here I describe my reflexive presence in four sites of archiving in the state-union complex. Anthropologies of the state have shown us how documents as one of the many forms of material culture play a key role to the everyday reproduction of the state.

Site I

In December 2007, The Calcutta Municipal Corporation decided to "identify and quantify" hawkers on the streets and footpaths of Calcutta Municipal area to set the year 1977 as the benchmark to evict hawkers who joined the trade after 1977—the year the Left Front captured the Writer's Buildings. The HSC made two interventions. First, its members began to follow the surveyors around and eventually challenged the accuracy of their assessment. If, for example, a stall was located vacant, and the Corporation surveyor was on the verge of omitting it from the survey register, HSC workers told them who the owner of the stall was and how long he had been trading there. The surveyor had to depend on the local knowledge to avoid the heightened administrative burden of the survey. Second, the HSC undertook a counter-survey, including a sample of 2,350 hawkers distributed along the 21 intersections. This pilot self-survey has become the seed for a census survey of all the members of the NHF (of which the HSC is the seed federation) at a national level following the promulgation of the SVA that has asked all the municipal governments to have a complete database of the licensed hawkers.

Site II

I attended several meetings of the HSC with the Mayor and other state functionaries in the last five years. In 2005, the Mayor formed a municipal consultative committee in which the HSC happens to be a participating organization. Between 2005 and 2009, the committee met five times in the chamber of the city Mayor. On each occasion, I found the leader, Shaktiman Ghosh attending the meeting with a file. When the corporation decided to evict hawkers from the Park Street, Shaktiman presented a map showing the exact location of the HSC's affiliate hawkers in Park Street area and claimed that his clients had been operating in the said area since the early 1970s. He presented the past eviction records attested by the Corporation and records of raid and confiscation of the

hawkers' wares by the police. A police official told me that the Police Department keeps confiscation records, release records and the records of "minor crimes" for five years and then destroys them. The counterfoils of the old records in the hand of the HSC give it a counter argument. The state authority cannot produce those documents but cannot ignore them either as they contained the official "signature" of the state. To the best of my knowledge, neither the Corporation, nor the Police Department has ever made any centralized documentation of each and every operation and raid. But, individual hawkers preserve what they receive from the administration, be it an eviction certificate, or a release order of confiscated goods. The papers contain dates, signatures of officials and stamps. Often these records change hands along with the site of vending that suggests that the HSC's archive is not a frozen entity awaiting a historian, it is rather an archive in constant circulation enabling the HSC to function well in the governmental space. The HSC's archival function enables it to convert the record of transgression to the record of legitimation.

Site III

It is true; Police stations destroy records of minor offences in five years. However, the Special Branch—the intelligence wing of the city police (SB) keeps track of public political rallies in the city and compiles them in files known as Daily Notes (DN). DN is a database than then gets copied and divided into sub-files under the heads of the "Left activities", "Muslim and Minority Affairs", "Labour Issues", and so on and are separately archived as politically sensitive documents to which public access is severely restricted if pertaining to the postcolonial period. These are the state's own private autobiographies surviving through the logic of internal duplication. The DN files, on the other hand, are accumulated as unclassified mother copies on yearly basis and are preserved as huge cyclostyled exercise-books. These can be accessed if you know the trick of operating in the lower bureaucracy. The Police Stations under Calcutta Police have a SB wing represented by a two member team. The SB team has informants within the political organizations who supply information about the forthcoming rallies. The SB team accordingly attends the rally and notes down the movement of the rally, measures the number of people attending the rally, records the speeches of the leaders in short-hand and describes the movement of the rally, and so on. The Police Station level SB teams write reports in Bengali, English and Hindi and then the reports come to the Officer-in-Charge of the DN section of SB along with documents such as pamphlets circulated in rallies, pictures of meetings and details of posters. The SB teams at Police Stations are

particularly asked to assess whether the street level political activities are 'antigovernment' in nature. The Officer-in-Charge, Daily Notes (OCDN) then summarizes the information in English and maintains an everyday file of city streets. Usually, the final entry is made in the file one or two days after the occurrence of the event. The file then goes to the DCSB (I) for classification. Such classifications also involve the DC's personal assessment and judgment of the event.

Site IV

I went to the office of the HSC at College Street for the first time in April 2007. Murad Hussain who at that point was in charge of the HSC's Office assured me partial access to the organization's archive. Murad added that some of the sensitive records would remain secret as otherwise they would reveal the 'internal contradictions of the Committee'. Murad said that those documents could only be made public if they resolved to document *their* history in the future. Murad was acutely aware of the public nature of the act of writing history, and he was not willing to allow me authorship of the HSC story. His ability to mark the border between secrets and revelation sparked my imagination regarding the meaning of secrecy in the life of the record. The secret archive of the HSC can be constructed to stand beside or even compete with state archives, but it can also be a hiding space in which subversive memories are stored and preserved for possible future disclosure. It is also worth noticing that, when Murad denied my request to see the secret archive, he revealed a tension, a discomfort with those records (note the Marxist term "inner contradiction" in Murad's statement). Murad knew that those documents might contradict the official position of the HSC. So, this secret archive is not only the strength of the HSC, it is also a constant source of discomfort, if not threat. The HSC thus preserves the right to write its autobiography and to disclose its own "secrets".

IV

In my early work I refused to consider the archive of the HSC as just the missing parcel of the state-archive, as entirely analogous to the latter's logic.   I rather showed how the HSC's archive is expressive of some essential incommensurability that is not reducible to the formal logic of the state archive. In my search of the terms and tenures of the autonomy of what I called 'archiving from below' I deliberately positioned the problematic of archive with the processes of everyday survival of forms of informality. There is a significant paradox which makes the case of the HSC different from the archival purpose of the state. Most of the mobilizations in the informal economy which make

demands on the state are founded on a sidestepping, suspension and violation of the law.[5] And yet, archive is law: as Foucault says, it is the law of what can and cannot be said.[6] It is the place from which order is given to pasts and presents, where - as Derrida (1998) says - men and gods command, where violence institutionalizes itself as law. It represents a principle that in Derrida's words is 'in the order of commencement as well as in the order of commandment'[7]. If archive represents the 'order', the 'principle' and the 'law', then does HSC's politics of archiving, in an intermediate space between 'formality/legality' (when all laws and regulations are complied with) and 'criminality' (when acts are performed clearly against official laws, basic morality, and the public interest), bring with it the notions of an alternative ordering, law or principle? My answer to this question was overly optimistic when I wrote my PhD dissertation. I saw in the HSC's politics of archiving the seed of a process of *institutionalization of informality* that could not be explained through the binary registers of formalization and informalization. However, the HSC's struggle for a new state law governing hawking prompts me to revisit some of my earlier positions. By aggressively advocating for the street vendors act at the grassroots level, the HSC has already internalized the statist separation between the spatial and the trade aspects of street hawking undermining its earlier radical posture in relation to the urban public space as a point of struggle reconfiguring the materiality of the footpath.

I shall end my talk by asserting something very obvious, but extremely relevant for our discussion. Like all ethnographic work, this one is also densely embedded in its own milieu. Remember the years I have already mentioned. I did my field research between 2007 and 2009 and again in 2011. This was particularly a turbulent moment in West Bengal's political history. Put in more apt term, this was a time when we were having our anarchist passages—a moment when we called into question the legitimacy of a long-serving regime, but were utterly confused about a new regime that would come to replace it. Such a moment of confusion shaped the kind of access I got in the archives of various unions which were at that point busy in speculating about their political future. The participants in the anti-land acquisition movement and the leaders in trade union movements uttered certain things about the old regime that they wouldn't have uttered in a situation of stability. Thus, the moment of my fieldwork was marked by aspiration, apprehension and suspicion. Certain archives came to

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[5] This is where the hawkers' question becomes an instance of 'political society—a space of negotiation between the state and the civil society peopled by population groups who exist by collectively sidestepping the bourgeois law of property. See Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed*.
[6] Michel Foucault, Archaeology of Knowledge, London and New York, Routledge, 1989.
[7] Jacques Derrida, Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression, Translated by Eric Prenowitz, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 2, 1996.

surface in the crosscurrent of the moment and then again merged into the world of the dead. I thus came to know about some of the respected leaders in different political parties and organizations who once acted as "police informants". Tracking at least three of them (which is of course, without their knowledge) from the DCSB's office to the union office four decades after the Operation Hawker, I could retrieve a number of now dormant state-society information networks, the knowledge of which was conceptually productive though not possible to reproduce them with certainty in an academic narrative.