

Empowering Railway Hawkers: Recognizing Their Contribution And Enhancing Their Working Conditions- A Study In The Route Of New Coochbehar To New Jalpaiguri And Dhubri

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Abstract:

Hawkers operates their business in informal sector in developing countries and are ignored in terms of planning and implementation of policies. Through empirical observation the sector contributions toward employment and generation of income have showed great concern. The several reviewed studies were done mostly in looking for the challenges facing by the hawkers. The study has revealed that, the central government and local government have not played their role to develop hawkers and contribute to economic development. The Paper tries to cover randomly on the route of New Coochbehar to New Jalpaiguri and Dhubri to New Jalpaiguri for the purpose of this study. In most of the cases, the temporary jobs are of low income and the job security is pitiable (Alivelu, 2008). Hawking is covering a big portion of the informal sector of Indian economy (Bhowmik, 2009). An enormous number of people undeterred by unemployment have chosen this profession who sell out all possible items on footpath, roads, bus stands even to passengers on trains and at stations. The New Jalpaiguri-New Coochbehar and New Jalpaiguri -Dhubri railway lines are connecting the railway station of Assam and rest of the North East. NJP and NCB is busiest route under Alipurduar Division. Many people of the adjacent to Railway station of these two railway route directly or indirectly maintain their livelihoods by working as a hawker in the train or opening different types of stall in the different railway station. This paper explores the realities of train hawking and the difficulties of train hawkers. This paper try to looks at the dynamics of their business and highlights their daily struggle from different angle and their survival with the situation.

Key Words: *Hawkers, Train, Passengers, Business, Station, Platform.*

INTRODUCTION:

A hawker is a vendor who sells easily transportable merchandise, often used interchangeably with terms like peddler or costermonger. Hawkercs are itinerant traders, traveling from place to place, often aboard various trains, to sell a diverse range of goods and earn their livelihood. In regions where the term is common, hawkers primarily deal in inexpensive items such as tea (*Chai*), puffed rice mixtures (*Jhalmuri*), spiced nuts (*Chanachur*), toys, handicrafts, and various local food products that reflect the unique cultural flavors of the area. To attract buyers, hawkers employ innovative sales techniques and engage in lively advertising. Their offerings can range from everyday essentials like pain balms, headache oils, and dental powders to affordable electronic gadgets such as earphones, Bluetooth speakers, power banks, chargers, mobile batteries, and phone covers. Whether stationary or mobile,

hawkers often rely on loud calls, chants, or engaging banter to draw attention and boost sales. For these vendors, trains are more than just a means of transportation; they are lifelines that connect them to opportunities and enable them to endure and overcome collective hardships. A notable route for such activity is along the Northeast Frontier Railway under the Alipurduar Division, which serves as a critical link between the Northeastern states of India and the rest of the country, as well as a gateway to Bhutan and Bangladesh. This study focuses on the stretch between New Cooch Behar and New Jalpaiguri, encompassing stations like Falakata, Dhupguri (DQG), New Maynaguri (NMX), Jalpaiguri Road (JPE), Alipurduar Junction (APDJ) and New Alipurduar (NOQ). Reliable sources estimate that over 8,000 hawkers operate within this division, working tirelessly from the early hours of the morning until the last Mail or Express train completes its journey. Many Hawkers work on a rotational or shift basis, adapting to the relentless demands of their trade. Hawkers often demonstrate the features and performance of their products to captivate passengers' attention, blending salesmanship with creativity. While the primary role of a hawker is to sell goods, their identity also encompasses an enduring spirit of resilience, adaptability and innovation, making them an integral part of the vibrant ecosystem of India's Railways.

Need for the Study:

The description above highlights a critical reality unemployed youth and individuals from marginalized communities are often compelled to take up hawking in the railway sector as a means of livelihood. These railway hawkers form a significant part of the informal economy, a sector that remains largely unrecognized and under-documented. To date, no official government agency has published a comprehensive report on railway hawkers, nor have any prominent sources provided an accurate account of the number of hawkers operating along railway networks. This lack of documentation also extends to their contributions to the national economy, which remain unmeasured and unacknowledged in mainstream economic studies. Railway hawkers play a vital role in providing essential supplies to passengers, offering convenience and resourcefulness during travel. From basic food items to everyday necessities, they serve as an indispensable part of the railway ecosystem. This dynamic can be likened to a "moving market" or a "market on wheels," where a self-sustaining community of buyers and sellers emerges, creating a unique economic ecosystem. Given this context, the need for the study becomes evident to illuminate the contributions of railway hawkers, highlight their socioeconomic significance and explore their role in sustaining an informal but thriving market that supports both travelers and the broader economy. This study aims to bridge the gap in understanding and recognition, shedding light on an often-overlooked yet integral segment of society.

Research Methodology:

This study aims to explore various issues related to the income sources of unregistered railway hawkers operating on a critical railway route connecting West Bengal and Assam, which serves as the sole railway link between Northeast India and the rest of the country. The selected route falls under the jurisdiction of the Northeast Frontier Railway and includes both railway platforms and several important running trains. The research focuses on a sample of 124 hawkers out of a total 956 unregistered hawkers actively engaged in rail hawking along this route. The survey was conducted randomly across the stretches between New Cooch Behar to New Jalpaiguri and Dhubri to New Jalpaiguri. These specific routes were purposively chosen based on the high number of hawkers operating there and the purchasing tendencies of railway passengers, which significantly influence hawkers' business. To ensure accuracy and credibility, consultations were held with local authorities, the Union of Railway Hawkers, and the Railway Protection Force (RPF) prior to conducting the survey. The insights gathered from these stakeholders provided valuable context and helped shape the scope of the study.

This research adopts a mixed-method approach, incorporating both quantitative data from the survey and qualitative observations from the field, to comprehensively analyze the socio-economic dimensions of unregistered railway hawkers in the region.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To identify the boarding train stations of railway hawkers Understanding the key stations where railway hawkers embark on trains to carry out their business activities.
2. To analyze the average daily income of railway hawkers Estimating the earnings of hawkers on an average day to assess their financial stability and economic contribution.
3. To explore the variety of items sold by railway hawkers and their procurement sources Investigating the types of goods hawkers sell and tracing their supply chains to better understand the operational framework of their trade.

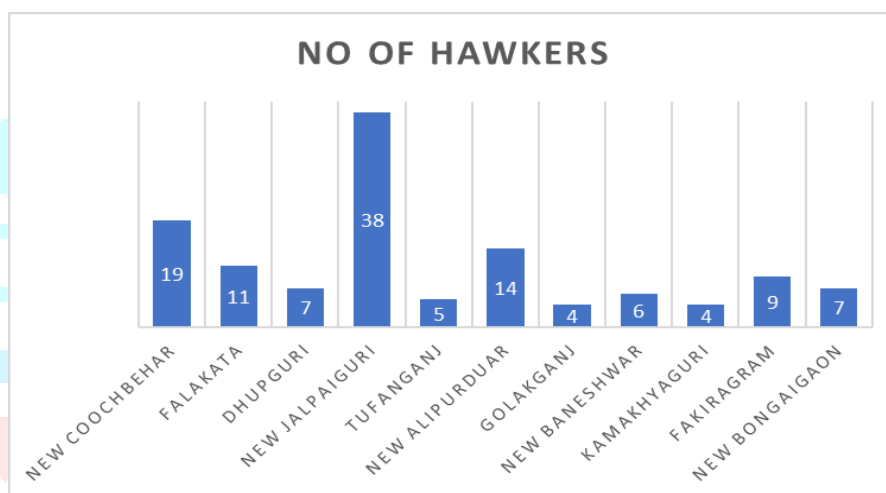
Scope of the Study:

This study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of railway hawking along the route between New Coochbehar and New Jalpaiguri, with a focus on identifying the primary stations wheremost railway hawkers board express and mail trains. The research also delves into the average income of hawkers, offering insights into their earnings based on the nature and scale of their business. Furthermore, the study examines the sources of procurement for the items sold by these hawkers, categorizing these goods to better understand their supply chains and operational dynamics. By addressing these aspects, the study aims to analyze railway hawking from multiple perspectives, shedding light on its socio-economic significance and the challenges faced by the hawkers in this informal trade ecosystem.

Literature Review :

The size, growth rate, and composition of a nation's population significantly impact its economic fortunes. In India, poverty and hunger have become persistent challenges, exacerbated by rapid population growth and the resulting pressure on limited resources. One of the primary contributors to poverty and inequality is the problem of unemployment, further intensified by inflation, which diminishes real income and purchasing power. Migration, often driven by the desire for better occupational and financial opportunities, plays a pivotal role in this context. Individuals typically leave rural areas in search of urban employment, drawn by the promise of better economic prospects. However, this migration largely consists of low-skilled individuals with minimal to no formal education. Their primary motivation is to secure a livelihood that can provide at least two meals a day. These individuals often find employment in daily-wage jobs or informal trading, including hawking. Street hawkers or vendors, as described by Bhowmik (2005), occupy public or private spaces, including pavements, to sell goods and provide services. Despite being informal, such businesses cater to the general population and contribute to society. For instance, metropolitan cities like Mumbai and Kolkata are home to approximately 2.5 lakh street hawkers each, while cities like Ahmedabad and Patna host around 80,000 hawkers (Bhowmik, 2003). Notably, female hawkers tend to sell smaller quantities of goods and earn less than their male counterparts (Bhowmik, 2010). The legal framework governing hawking in India is rooted in Article 19(1)(g) of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to practice any profession or trade, subject to reasonable restrictions under Article 19(6). In *South Calcutta Hawkers Association vs. Government of West Bengal*, the court emphasized that street trading is a fundamental right but must be regulated to balance public interest and freedom of trade. Proper regulation is necessary to ensure that hawkers do not impede the primary function of public roads, which is to facilitate traffic (Ravikumar, *Legal Rights of Street Traders in India – Hawkers*). This study draws on data collected from 124 railway hawkers operating along the routes between New Coochbehar (NCB) and New Jalpaiguri (NJP), and the Dhubri (DBB) route. The survey revealed that: 3.2% of hawkers work on the New Coochbehar to Dhubri route. 7.45% operate between New Coochbehar and New Bongaigaon (NBQ). 89.35% work between New Coochbehar and New Jalpaiguri. These hawkers were interviewed using a structured questionnaire, focusing on those who boarded from major stations along the routes. The selection of these routes was based on the density and availability of hawkers, ensuring a representative sample for the study.

NAME OF THE STATIONS	NO OF HAWKERS
New Coochbehar	19
Falakata	11
Dhupguri	07
New Jalpaiguri	38
Tufanganj	05
New Alipurduar	14
Golakganj	04
New Baneshwar	06
Kamakhyaaguri	04
Fakiragram	09
New Bongaigaon	07



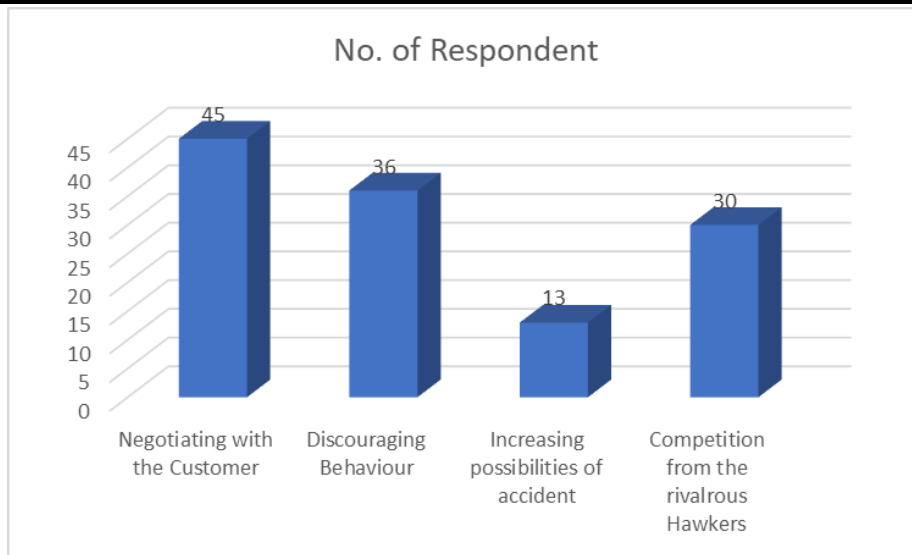
Observations and Findings:

The study revealed significant insights into the operations and challenges faced by railway hawkers, particularly across the New Coochbehar (NCB) to New Jalpaiguri (NJP) route, which has the highest density of hawkers. This is attributed to the high frequency of trains along this route, creating better business opportunities compared to routes like NCB to Dhubri, which experience fewer hawkers.

Age-wise Engagement in Specific Business:

□ Elderly Hawkers (50+ years): Predominantly engaged in selling food items like sweets (*misti*), puffed rice (*jhal muri*), peanuts (*mumfuli*), and popped rice (*makhoi*), which require minimal physical effort and investment. Hawkers aged 20-40 years: Actively involved in selling a mix of high-demand items, including electronic gadgets (power banks, headphones, torches, chargers) and everyday consumables items like tea (*chai*), water bottles, snacks (*roti-sabji, samosas, chanachur*), and toys for children.

Challenges faced by the Hawkers	No. of Respondent
Negotiating with the Customer	45
Discouraging Behaviour	36
Increasing possibilities of accident	13
Competition from the rivalrous Hawkers	30
Total	124



Procurement of Goods: The hawkers procure their goods in bulk from various local markets where the whole market are situated for specific items

□ **Electronic items:** Electronic items such as Power bank, Headphone, Charger, Bluetooth Speaker, Pen Drive, Watch, Electronic Toys are generally available in the following market.

*Hong Kong Market (Siliguri)

*Chinese Market (New Jalpaiguri)

* Japanipatti and Bhabanipatti Markets (Coochbehar)

□ **Food items:** Puffed rice (*jhal muri*), peanuts (*mumfuli*), and popped rice (*makhoi*)

* Masallapatti Market (Falakata)

*Old Bhabaniganj Market.

*Chinese Market

During the time of study we met Bikash Debnath, a 37years old hawker from Falakata, starts his day with a humble breakfast of *laal chai* and *muri* at the break of dawn. By 4:30 am, he is already preparing for his daily journey, boarding the Sealdah Kanchanjunga Express at 5:10 am, carrying bags filled with electronic gadgets like power banks, headphones and chargers. For Bikash, the train is more than a mode of transport; it is his moving market place, a lifeline that connects him to his livelihood and dreams. He spends his day walking through crowded train coaches, calling out to passengers, hoping to sell enough to support his family. Despite the challenges of fierce competition, low margins and the occasional defective product with no warranty from wholesalers, Bikash faces his work with resilience. He endures customer complaints with patience and humility, knowing that each sale brings him closer to providing a better life for his family. Every evening, he returns home around 7:00 or 8:00 pm, often stopping by the market to buy groceries, vegetables, or fish for his family. Bikash's life is one of quiet determination. He takes pride in ensuring his two children receive a quality education, even enrolling them in a private Bangla medium school despite his modest earnings. "I don't want them to struggle like I do," he says with a hopeful smile, his eyes reflecting both the weight of his hardships and the light of his aspirations. His love for his parents is evident as he shares how he manages their medical expenses despite financial strains. For Bikash, every step he takes on the train, every product he sells, and every rupee he earns is a step toward a future where his children can stand on their own feet. His story is not just one of struggle but of hope, sacrifice, and an unyielding desire to create a brighter tomorrow for his loved ones. During our study in December, amidst the chill of the winter season, we found ourselves at New Baneswar railway station, where the New Jalpaiguri Intercity Express (Train No. 15704) stood on Platform 1 at around 9:25 A.M. Among the bustling crowd of hawkers boarding the train, our attention was drawn to a 59-year-old vendor, Pradip Ghosh, who carried an aluminum bucket and saucepan filled with three varieties of *misti*: *Sandesh*, *Rosogolla*, and *Lal Mohon*. Pradip, with a kind smile and weathered hands,

shared that selling *misti* on trains has been his family's traditional trade, passed down through generations. His voice carried a mix of nostalgia and resilience as he recounted starting this business as a young boy. "Back then," he said, "I sold these sweets for just Rs. 2 each. Today, the price has risen to Rs. 5-6 due to the increasing cost of milk, sugar, and even the wood used to prepare them." Every day, Pradip carries 400-500 pieces of sweets, boarding the train at 9:00 am to begin his journey. His route is a dynamic one, hopping between 4 to 5 trains, including the Kamrup Express, Teesta Torsha Express, Kamakhya Express, Avadh Assam Express, and the North East Express, finally making his way to New Jalpaiguri. By the end of the route, he usually sells most of his sweets, his face lighting up with pride when he talks about his loyal customers who eagerly await his arrival. However, the journey isn't always sweet. Pradip explained how summer presents unique challenges: the heat spoils the sweets quickly, making them difficult to sell the next day as they lose their freshness and develop an unpleasant smell. Winter, on the other hand, is a blessing for his trade, allowing him to keep the sweets fresh longer and sell more efficiently. Pradip's story is one of endurance, tradition, and adaptation. Despite the challenges, he continues to wake up each day with determination, carrying not just sweets but also the legacy of his family and the hopes of sustaining a livelihood in an ever-changing world.

Suggestions for Improving the Welfare and Recognition of Railway Hawkers:

1. Formation and Recognition of a Hawkers' Committee

*The government should officially recognize hawkers committees to represent their community and address their concerns.

* The leadership of this committee should rotate periodically to ensure fair representation. For instance, if the President is from New Jalpaiguri, the Vice-President should be from New Coochbehar, and the Secretary from Falakata, with a maximum tenure of 2-3 years for each role. This rotational system would encourage inclusivity and prevent stagnation in leadership.

2. Conflict Resolution Mechanism

* In case of disputes between hawkers, authorities, the Railway Protection Force (RPF), or passengers, the hawkers; committee should take immediate steps to mediate and resolve the issue.

* A clear protocol should be established for addressing these matters swiftly to maintain harmony and prevent disruption of services.

3. Healthcare and Insurance Provisions

* First Aid Facilities: Every major railway station, such as New Coochbehar, New Jalpaiguri, Falakata, and Dhubri, should have accessible first-aid facilities for hawkers.

* Health Insurance: The government should introduce a subsidized health insurance scheme tailored for hawkers, covering medical emergencies and routine health check-ups.

* Life Insurance: The Railway Department should provide life insurance policies to hawkers, ensuring their families are financially secure in case of any unforeseen events.

4. Hawker Certification and Incentives

* The Railway Department should periodically assess hawkers based on their behavior, adherence to rules, and service quality. Certificates of recognition can be awarded to those with a good track record.

* Hawkers who have consistently followed regulations and contributed to passenger convenience for several years should be eligible for special concessions, such as reduced travel fares or free travel on certain routes. This gesture would serve as a token of appreciation for their hard work.

5. Restroom Facilities for Hawkers

- * Restrooms should be constructed at major stations like New Coochbehar, New Jalpaiguri, Falakata, and Dhubri, allowing hawkers to rest and recreation during their long working hours.
- * To support these facilities, hawkers could contribute a nominal fee of Rs. 100 per month, which would also help the railway department maintain and improve its infrastructure.

6. Involvement of Railway Officials

- * A member of the railway station management should be included in the hawkers' committee as an official representative. This inclusion would strengthen communication between hawkers and the railway authorities, ensuring that issues are addressed collaboratively.

7. Skill Enhancement and Upliftment

- * The Railway Board could organize skill enhancement programs for hawkers, helping them improve their sales techniques, customer interaction skills, and knowledge of railway guidelines.
- * These initiatives would not only benefit the hawkers but also enhance the overall travel experience for passengers.

8. Recognizing Long-Term Service

- * Hawkers who have served passengers with dedication for years should be acknowledged publicly. Special travel privileges or awards could be introduced to honor their contributions.
- * Such initiatives would boost morale and inspire others to adhere to best practices. By implementing these measures, the government and railway authorities can create a more structured, supportive, and equitable environment for hawkers, recognizing their vital role in serving the traveling public while improving their overall quality of life.

Conclusion:

The role of railway hawkers, though often underappreciated, is integral to the smooth functioning of the railway system and the convenience of passengers. These individuals, through their daily hustle and commitment, provide not only goods but also a sense of familiarity and comfort to travelers. From food to small electronics, they are often the unsung lifeline for passengers on long journeys, meeting their needs when traditional services fall short. However, their contributions extend far beyond the products they sell. Hawkers are symbols of resilience, navigating a world full of challenges to make a living and support their families. Despite their undeniable importance, the conditions in which many hawkers work are far from ideal. Often relegated to the margins of society, they face issues such as health risks, lack of proper infrastructure, absence of social security, and conflict with authorities. The lack of recognition and support from formal institutions only adds to their challenges. To remedy this, it is imperative that the government, railway authorities, and society at large take active steps to address these concerns, ensuring that hawkers are not only recognized for their invaluable contribution but are also provided with the tools, resources, and protection they need to thrive. One of the key recommendations is the establishment of a structured, rotating hawkers' committee, which would give them a platform to voice their concerns and collaborate with authorities to resolve issues. This would not only help in bridging gaps between hawkers and the railway management but also foster a sense of community and responsibility. Ensuring healthcare, life insurance, and proper work conditions through rest facilities would safeguard the well-being of hawkers, who often work long hours in physically demanding conditions. Furthermore, providing them with recognition for their dedication, in the form of certificates, special travel privileges, or discounts, would boost morale and encourage them to continue delivering excellent service to passengers.

Equally important is the introduction of skill development programs and better regulation of their business practices. By offering these opportunities, the government and railway authorities can empower hawkers, helping them improve their service quality and earn better livelihoods. Also, involving hawkers in the decision-making process and ensuring that they follow fair and transparent practices will contribute to the smooth functioning of the railway ecosystem.

In conclusion, supporting and uplifting railway hawkers is not just a matter of improving their working conditions; it is about recognizing their fundamental role in the larger social and economic fabric. By providing them with the necessary tools to succeed—whether through recognition, support systems, or infrastructure—hawkers can continue their hard work while contributing to the broader development of the railway system and the communities they serve. With these steps, the relationship between hawkers, passengers, and railway authorities can evolve into a harmonious and mutually beneficial one, where every individual's efforts are valued, and every contribution is acknowledged.

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