



Hawker's Daily Livelihood During and After COVID-19: A Sociological Study on Dum Dum Rail Station, West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Suburban trains are idling in the sidings, and the railway hawkers in Kolkata are struggling to make a living during the COVID-19 pandemic. The news of the railways' privatization is adding to their uncertainty about the future. During the lockdown period, many of the hawkers shifted their work to selling stones, fruits, and vegetables on the roadside and in localities. Some of them carry the produce on their heads as they do not have cycles. Given this context, the present study aims to analyze whether railway hawkers are earning enough to sustain their livelihoods and support their families. It also aims to analyze how many jobs they do simultaneously and determine whether they fall under any government schemes. The research is a descriptive study based on both qualitative and quantitative data, with a sample size of 30 at Dumdum junction. The research findings will be analyzed with the help of primary and secondary data.

Introduction:

The unorganized sector has become a major source of employment in India due to the lack of opportunities in the organized sector. This sector includes hawkers who sell goods on footpaths, roads,

bus stands, and railway stations. However, increased competition, scarcity of resources, and an exploding population have led to the emergence of an unorganized economy, which has affected the livelihoods of many marginalized people. Although the Indian government has taken measures to support farmers and marginalized communities, many of these people remain underserved. Unfortunately, the official count of railway hawkers in the country has not been done yet. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many railway hawkers in areas like Canning, Diamond Harbour, Laxmikantapur, Bangon, and Basirhat have lost their livelihoods and are struggling to make ends meet.. Hawking is a significant part of the informal sector of the Indian economy, and a large portion of the unemployed population has chosen this profession. However, the lockdown measures have severely impacted the lives of hawkers who sell goods on footpaths, roads, bus stands, and railway stations. They are daily wage earner in some cases hawkers are only one bread-earning member in their family so these hawkers are fully dependent on railway stations.

Review of literature:

Sumanta Ray, (2020) shows that Asim Biswas, 40, used to sell parathas at the Ashoknagar Road railway station as a station hawker before the lockdown. 12 in his family members due to the shutdown of rail services in the lockdown, he was trying to work as a house painter which earned him Rs 300 to 500 a day but that job ended in a few days. On March 24, the lockdown was announced, when train services were suspended and railway platforms were deserted, where the mobile hawkers were operating It suddenly stopped.

Soumya Das et. al, (2020) discussed The last time Babusona Mandal was able to open his tea shop in Salt Lake, on the eastern edge of Kolkata, was on stopped March 21 after the prime minister announced a Janata Curfew to combat the outbreak of the coronavirus. Since then he has not been able to run a business for a day and with the extension of the lockdown, Babusona Mandal and many others like him face an uncertain future. Babusona Mandal is one of the 16 lakh hawkers in West Bengal who have struggled to live in the face of the crisis. He also said that he could not afford his father's medicine expenses, to resume their business and family of 6 even after revocation of the lockdown period.

Biraj Kanti Mandal, (2019) The Eastern Railway is the lifeline of the South 24 Parganas Sundarbans region providing a means of connectivity and integration necessary for social development and traversing the length and breadth of the region. The Sealdah Southern Branch railway line connects Sealdah with Budge Budge, Diamond Harbour, Namkhana and Canning railway stations. The same

Calcutta is a part of the urban railway system and is under the Eastern Railway. Many people of Sundarbans depend on railway services to earn their living as stall keepers at hawking in stations, trains and increasing day by day. The people of Sundarbans have got an opportunity to do some small business with little investment throughout the year. Hence, the railway station plays an important role in their daily life, not only to generate income but also to sustain their livelihood in a different way. But the problem is that it is not a permanent livelihood so daily earnings are not equal, sometimes less sometimes more, and since even in a formal sector there is fear of eviction. Hawkers are considered very insignificant people, who are forced to live in unsafe, unsanitary conditions.

Chetna Yerunkar, (2015) Discussed that Civic authorities accused the hawkers of taking over the streets. Claimed that the civic authorities do not want to give them licenses, as allowing hawkers to sell goods illegally on the wire will allow them to regularly collect fines from the hawkers. Mumbai Hawker Union leader Shashank Rao said that taking away the rights of hawkers in natural markets will not solve the problem of pedestrians. Various hawker unions have filed court cases and complaints against civic bodies. Recently hawkers were evicted in Chembur. Revenue will be generated if a license is issued. But the hawker's union demanded that they would not release the huge amount of illegal money coming to the civic authorities. So, they don't issue licenses.

Pinki Kumari, (2015) Discussed that Street vendors are an important segment of the informal economy with specific problems and challenges. Vending as a profession has been carried out throughout known history and is a prominent and integral part of urban Mughal culture. They cater to the needs of a large number of customers from the middle- and lower-income classes. and makes a significant contribution to the economy, the use of the prefix street with the word vendor gives them a whole new identity that is usually derogatory. Street vendors are often determined, and uncertain. Evictions, paying bribes, non-availability of government facilities, lack of sanitary environment and electrical facilities, they faced various obstacles. Improving the working conditions of street vendors and their economic, social, and legal status is a major challenge for the state. The Act promises to issue licenses to vendors and the formation of City Vending Committees and most importantly planned vending zones in cities.

Significance for the selection of the study:

I chose to study the effects of the lockdown period on people's ability to earn a living. Specifically, I'm interested in understanding the challenges they have faced during this time, especially in terms of their

economic situation. Additionally, I want to explore the alternative ways people have found to earn their daily wages.

Objectives:

The present research work is an attempt to investigate the influence of lockdown on the hawker's daily wage earnings at Dum Dum Junction railway station. To address the challenges faced by the hawkers from their economic sections in the period of COVID-19. The following are the main objectives of the present research work: -

- ❖ Investigate the types of goods hawkers sell at stations.
- ❖ Only by the hawking profession their and their family's life is properly maintained.
- ❖ Is he/ she able to do any other work besides that to bear their daily expenses?
- ❖ What are the implications of the coronavirus and lockdown on their livelihood?

Methods and materials:

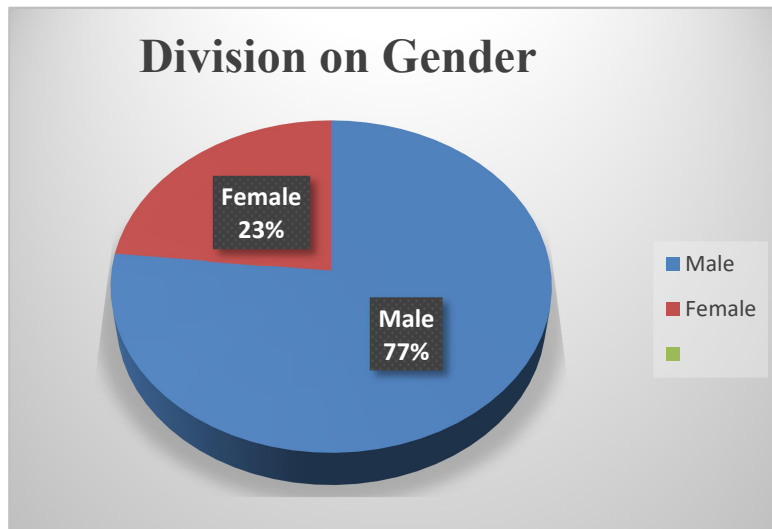
The research methodology can be expressed following: -

In this study, the objective is to analyze the economic problems that have emerged due to the lockdown situation. The study focuses on the hawkers present at Dum Dum railway junction in Kolkata, West Bengal. Both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are used to conduct descriptive studies. The hawkers are selected using the cluster sampling method, and data is collected through face-to-face interviews using a pre-defined schedule. Additionally, secondary data has been sourced from related research papers, journals, and articles.

Result and Discussion: -

The sample size was 30 to carry out this research. There 77% of respondents are male and the rest of the 23% are female. Both males and females do hard work for wage-earning every day. In that time when I collected data from both respondents, found that women hawkers worked hard most. They manage household work as well as hawking business to help their husband and family.

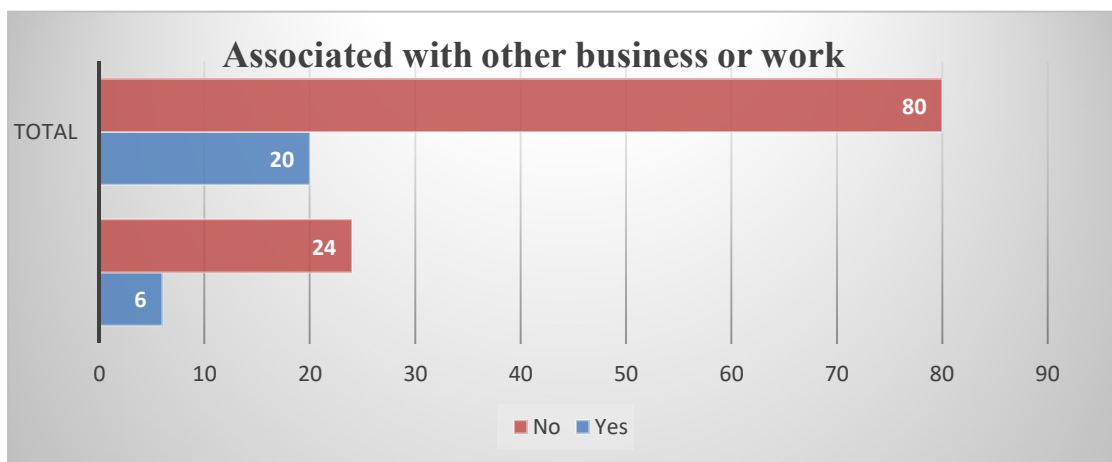
Figure: -1



Source: - Own survey

According to the study, 20% of the respondents were associated with other businesses or jobs besides hawking, such as street vending, wall painting, or manual labor. The remaining 80% were solely dependent on hawking for their livelihoods. During that period, they faced financial difficulties and were unable to afford their basic needs and expenses, especially those who were not engaged in any other business or work.

Figure: -2

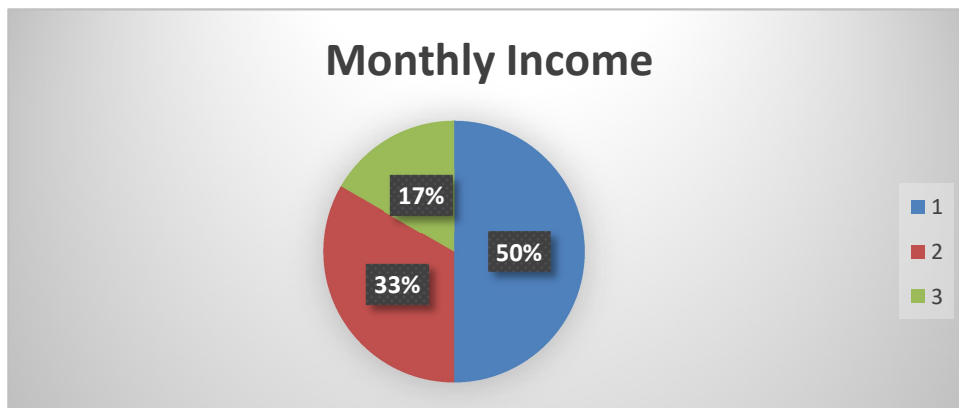


Source: - Own survey

According to this study, the monthly income of hawkers was investigated. The results showed that 50% of respondents earned 5000-10000, 33% earned 10000- 15000, and the remaining 17% population

earned 15000- 20000. All respondents mentioned that their income has decreased significantly after the pandemic, compared to what they earned before the lockdown. They also highlighted that the cost of medicinal expenses has increased, making it challenging to cover family expenses.

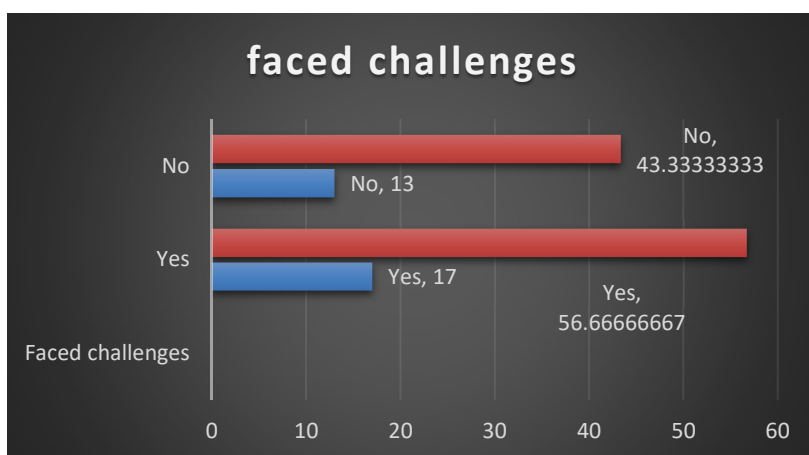
Figure: -3



Source: - Own survey

During the lockdown period, many hawkers faced various challenges. Among them, 57% reported facing difficulties while the remaining 43% did not face any issues. The hawkers who solely depended on hawking as their source of income faced a lot of uncertainty during this time. The transport system was completely shut down, and they had no means to sustain their livelihoods. This period was especially tough for hawkers and other informal sector workers.

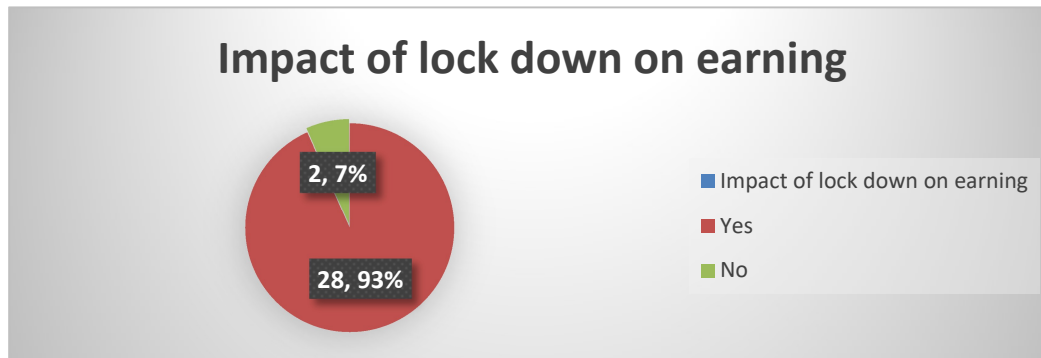
Figure: -4



Source: - Own survey

This research highlights the impact of the lockdown on the daily wage earnings of railway hawkers. The study found that 93% of the hawkers were affected by the lockdown, while only 7% were not. These hawkers belong to the economically poor section of society and have no savings or funds as they rely solely on their daily earnings. Some of them expressed their concern by saying, "We may not have died due to the pandemic, but we may die of hunger." Their only source of income is through hawking.

Figure: -5



Source: - Own survey

Analysis of some open-ended questions: -

- I. A 60-year-old man who works as a hawker expressed his concern regarding his two educated sons, who are unable to find jobs due to a lack of employment opportunities and their unwillingness to take up menial jobs. He is the sole earner in the family and feels that education has been a curse for him.
- II. Three women who started their hawking business to support their families have faced various problems. Four other women were initially barred from starting their businesses. However, due to the lockdown, they have been unable to earn an extra income to support their families.
- III. Two hawkers who live in rented houses in Kolkata have found it challenging to support their families with their low income, especially during the lockdown when they had to be extremely frugal.
- IV. The lockdown has had a significant impact on the business of hawkers. Vegetable sellers, for instance, were only allowed to sell for two hours, but even then, they did not make many sales. After the lockdown was lifted, their income dropped significantly as many of their regular customers no longer came to buy from them.

Findings: -

The findings explore 4 emerging themes: -

1. During the lockdown, they did not have enough money to support their family. Even after the lockdown was lifted, their income was reduced significantly.
2. The jobs they took up during the lockdown were contractual, and they only provided income as long as there was work available.
3. The lack of income during the lockdown has made it difficult for them to start a new business, as the required capital is not available.
4. Those who have sick family members or are themselves sick are finding it difficult to bear the cost of medical treatment.

Conclusion: -

After considering the above discussion, it can be inferred that the daily necessities provided by hawkers are essential for every individual. However, hawkers are typically undervalued and considered to be in low-level jobs, and as an unorganized sector, their income is not consistent daily. The government should establish permanent arrangements or introduce schemes to support these traders. They faced significant challenges during the lockdown period and also encountered many problems in the business field. As a result, the government should take appropriate steps to prevent such issues from arising in the future.

Limitations: -

Encountered several obstacles during research on the hawkers at Dum Dum Station. Here are some of them:

1. To collect information during the peak sales time, and many hawkers found it to be a waste of their time. They expressed their annoyance by nagging.
2. The hawkers were exhausted after a long day of hard work, so they were not willing to talk much.
3. Some hawkers did not want to cooperate with my research.
4. Due to the lack of time, wasn't able to collect more samples.

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