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Hawkers in Dhaka City: The Heartbeat of Street Commerce

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Introduction

In the bustling streets of Dhaka, amidst the chaos of traffic and the constant hum of urban life, one can find a vibrant ecosystem of hawkers. These street vendors, with their colorful displays and enticing calls, form an integral part of the city's commerce and culture. From fresh fruits to savory snacks, from clothing to electronics, Dhaka's hawkers offer a diverse array of goods, catering to the needs and desires of its residents.

Street hawking in Dhaka City epitomizes the vibrant tapestry of urban life, where the rhythms of commerce intersect with the pulse of everyday existence. From the chaotic thoroughfares of Old Dhaka to the bustling avenues of Gulshan, the presence of hawkers is ubiquitous, their makeshift stalls and carts offering a kaleidoscope of goods and services to passersby. Yet, beyond the colorful facades and lively transactions lies a complex socio-economic ecosystem that both sustains and challenges the livelihoods of these street vendors.

At its core, street hawking embodies the essence of the urban informal economy, a dynamic and often overlooked sector that thrives on the margins of formal regulation and recognition. Here, amidst the cacophony of honking horns and bustling crowds, individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds converge to participate in a centuries-old tradition of street vending. For some, it is a means of survival, a way to eke out a modest income in the face of limited employment opportunities and economic constraints. For others, it represents a form of entrepreneurial endeavor, an avenue to showcase creativity, innovation, and resilience in the pursuit of economic independence.

The phenomenon of street hawking in Dhaka is deeply intertwined with the city's historical, cultural, and economic fabric. From the ancient bazaars of Mughal times to the modern-day commercial hubs, the tradition of open-air markets and mobile vendors has endured, adapting to the changing contours of urbanization and globalization. Today, Dhaka's street hawkers offer a diverse array of goods, ranging from fresh produce and street food delicacies to clothing, accessories, and electronics. Their presence adds color and dynamism to the urban landscape, transforming mundane street corners into bustling marketplaces and social gathering spots.

However, the reality of street hawking in Dhaka is far from romanticized portrayals of bustling markets and enterprising vendors. Behind the scenes, street hawkers grapple with a myriad of challenges, from regulatory hurdles and legal ambiguity to socio-economic vulnerabilities and precarious working conditions. The lack of formal recognition and social protection leaves them vulnerable to exploitation, harassment, and arbitrary eviction, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization. Moreover, the proliferation of unregulated vending zones often exacerbates congestion, sanitation issues, and conflicts over public space, underscoring the need for holistic urban planning and governance solutions.

In light of these complexities, understanding the dynamics of street hawking in Dhaka is imperative for policymakers, urban planners, researchers, and civil society actors alike. By unpacking the socio-economic, spatial, and regulatory dimensions of street vending, we can identify opportunities for enhancing the livelihoods of vendors, promoting inclusive urban development, and fostering vibrant, resilient cities. This article seeks to

delve into this multifaceted subject, drawing upon research insights, empirical evidence, and stakeholder perspectives to illuminate the role of street hawkers in shaping the urban landscape of Dhaka City.

The Pulse of Urban Life

Hawkers are the pulse of Dhaka's urban life, providing convenience and affordability to millions of city dwellers. For many, these vendors are not just sources of goods but familiar faces, part of the fabric of their daily routines. Whether it's grabbing a quick snack on the way to work or purchasing essentials on a tight budget, Dhaka's hawkers serve a vital role in meeting the everyday needs of its populace.

Hawkers, often overlooked yet vital components of urban life, pulsate through the bustling arteries of cities worldwide. They embody the spirit of entrepreneurship, resilience, and community, playing multifaceted roles in shaping the urban landscape.

At first glance, a hawker might appear as a mere vendor, selling goods or services from makeshift stalls or carts. However, they are more than just purveyors of goods; they are cultural custodians, offering a glimpse into the soul of a city. Whether it's the sizzle of stir-frying noodles on a bustling Asian street or the aroma of freshly baked bread wafting through European alleys, hawkers infuse cities with sensory experiences that resonate with locals and tourists alike.

Beyond their economic contribution, hawkers serve as social connectors, fostering a sense of belonging and community cohesion. Their stalls often double as informal meeting spots, where neighbors gather to catch up on local gossip or discuss pressing issues. In this way, hawkers serve as nodes in the social fabric of urban life, forging connections that transcend socioeconomic barriers.

Moreover, hawkers are often guardians of tradition and heritage, preserving culinary and artisanal practices that might otherwise fade into obscurity. Whether it's crafting traditional handicrafts or preparing age-old recipes passed down through

generations, hawkers keep cultural legacies alive, enriching the urban tapestry with their unique offerings.

However, the path of the hawker is not without challenges. From bureaucratic red tape to urban development projects, hawkers often find themselves navigating a labyrinth of obstacles in their quest to sustain their livelihoods. Yet, it is their resilience in the face of adversity that makes them all the more admirable. Despite the odds, many hawkers persevere, adapting to change while holding steadfast to their craft and community.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of hawkers in urban ecosystems. Governments and grassroots organizations are increasingly working to create supportive environments for hawkers, providing them with access to training, resources, and legal recognition. By doing so, they not only safeguard the livelihoods of individual hawkers but also preserve the vibrancy and diversity that define urban life.

The world of Dhaka's hawkers is a testament to the entrepreneurial spirit that thrives in the city's streets. Many of these vendors are self-starters, carving out their niches in highly competitive markets. With little more than a small cart or a patch of pavement, they showcase their wares, employing clever marketing tactics and honing their salesmanship to attract customers.

Challenges and Resilience

The life of a hawker in Dhaka is not without its challenges. Regulatory hurdles, competition, and sometimes even harassment pose constant threats to their livelihoods. Yet, despite these obstacles, Dhaka's hawkers display remarkable resilience. They adapt to changing circumstances, find

innovative solutions, and persevere in the face of adversity, embodying the indomitable spirit of the city.

Hawkers in Dhaka City face a multitude of challenges in their daily lives, yet they often demonstrate remarkable resilience in overcoming these obstacles. Here's an overview of some of the challenges they encounter and how they exhibit resilience:

a. **Legal and Regulatory Challenges:** One of the primary challenges for hawkers in Dhaka is navigating the complex and often ambiguous legal and regulatory environment. Many operate without proper licenses or permits, making them vulnerable to harassment, fines, and eviction by law enforcement authorities. Despite these legal challenges, hawkers often adapt their strategies to avoid conflicts with authorities, such as relocating temporarily or forming informal networks to share information and resources.

b. **Limited Access to Infrastructure:** Infrastructure deficiencies, including inadequate sanitation facilities, lack of proper waste management, and insufficient shelter from the elements, pose significant challenges for hawkers in Dhaka. Hawkiers demonstrate resilience by improvising solutions to address infrastructure gaps, such as setting up makeshift shelters or collaborating with local communities to improve sanitation and waste disposal practices.

c. **Competition and Market Dynamics.** Dhaka's bustling street markets are characterized by intense competition among hawkers vying for customers' attention and limited space. Economic downturns,

fluctuating consumer demand, and changing market trends further exacerbate competition. Hawkiers exhibit resilience by diversifying their products, offering unique goods or services, and leveraging social networks to attract customers. They also adapt quickly to changing market conditions and consumer preferences.

d. **Vulnerability to Natural Disasters.** Dhaka City is prone to natural disasters such as floods and cyclones, which can disrupt hawking activities, damage infrastructure, and jeopardize the livelihoods of hawkiers. Hawkiers demonstrate resilience by implementing disaster preparedness measures, such as securing their merchandise, relocating to safer areas during emergencies, and collaborating with local authorities and relief organizations to access assistance and support.

e. **Health and Safety Risks.** Hawkiers are exposed to various health and safety hazards, including air pollution, food contamination, and occupational injuries, which pose risks to their well-being and livelihoods. Despite these risks, hawkiers often prioritize their health and safety by adhering to hygiene standards, seeking medical care when needed, and advocating for improved working conditions and access to healthcare services.

While hawkiers in Dhaka City confront numerous challenges in their daily lives, their resilience shines through in their ability to adapt, innovate, and persevere in the face of adversity. Through collective action, community solidarity, and resourcefulness, they continue to play a vital role in the urban economy and social fabric of Dhaka.

Community and Connection

Hawkers play a significant role in fostering community and connection in Dhaka City through various means. Hawker markets and street stalls often serve as social hubs where community members gather to shop, eat, and interact. These spaces provide opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds to come together, fostering social connections and a sense of belonging. Hawkets form informal networks and communities within their local neighborhoods. They share information, resources, and support each other, creating a sense of camaraderie and solidarity among fellow vendors. Hawkets offer a wide variety of goods and services that reflect the cultural diversity of Dhaka City. Through their products and interactions with customers, they contribute to cultural exchange and appreciation, celebrating the city's rich tapestry of traditions and heritage.

Hawker markets often host community events, festivals, and celebrations that bring residents together. These events provide opportunities for socializing, entertainment, and cultural enrichment, strengthening community bonds and fostering a sense of pride in local identity. By patronizing hawkets, community members contribute to the local economy and support small-scale entrepreneurs. This economic interdependence fosters a sense of community solidarity and mutual support, as residents recognize the importance of sustaining local businesses and livelihoods. Hawking provides employment opportunities for marginalized groups, including women, migrants, and low-income individuals, empowering them to participate in the urban economy and community life. By offering a platform for economic participation and social integration, hawkets contribute to greater inclusivity and social cohesion within Dhaka City.

Indeed, hawkets play a vital role in building community and connection in Dhaka City by

providing spaces for social interaction, fostering cultural exchange, supporting local economies, and empowering marginalized groups. Their presence enriches the social fabric of urban neighborhoods, contributing to a sense of belonging and collective identity among residents.

Towards a Sustainable Future

As Dhaka continues to grow and evolve, the role of hawkets in the urban landscape remains ever-important. However, their presence also raises questions about urban planning, public space management, and socioeconomic inclusion. Balancing the need for regulation with the recognition of their contribution to the city's vibrancy is essential for ensuring a sustainable and equitable future for all residents. Moving towards a sustainable future for hawkets in Dhaka requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses environmental, social, and economic dimensions. Here are several strategies that could help achieve this goal:

Investing in infrastructure improvements such as designated hawker zones with proper sanitation facilities, waste management systems, and shelter from the elements can enhance working conditions for hawkets while minimizing environmental impacts. Encouraging hawkets to adopt sustainable practices, such as using eco-friendly packaging, reducing food waste, and sourcing locally-produced goods, can help minimize their environmental footprint and contribute to the city's sustainability goals. Providing formal recognition and legal protection for hawkets through licensing schemes and regulatory frameworks can help legitimize their businesses while ensuring compliance with health, safety, and environmental standards.

Offering training, capacity-building, and financial support to aspiring and existing hawkets can empower them to operate more sustainably and

efficiently, fostering entrepreneurship and economic resilience within the hawker community. Creating opportunities for hawkers to access larger markets, such as through online platforms or partnerships with retailers, can help expand their customer base and increase their income potential while promoting sustainable consumption patterns. Facilitating collaboration and knowledge-sharing among stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, businesses, and community organizations, can help identify and implement innovative solutions to sustainability challenges facing hawkers in Dhaka.

Ensuring that policies and initiatives to support hawkers are inclusive and equitable, particularly for

marginalized groups such as women, migrants, and low-income individuals, can help reduce socio-economic disparities and promote social cohesion within the hawker community. Educating consumers and the general public about the importance of supporting sustainable hawking practices and the benefits of buying from local vendors can help shift attitudes and behaviors towards more environmentally and socially responsible consumption habits. By implementing these strategies in a coordinated and collaborative manner, Dhaka can move towards a more sustainable future for its hawker community, where economic prosperity, social inclusion, and environmental stewardship go hand in hand.

Conclusion:

The hawker community in Dhaka plays a vital role in the urban fabric, contributing to the city's vibrancy, cultural diversity, and economic vitality. However, they face numerous challenges, ranging from legal and regulatory barriers to environmental and social pressures. Despite these obstacles, hawkers demonstrate resilience and adaptability, finding innovative ways to sustain their livelihoods and build community connections. Moving towards a sustainable future for hawkers in Dhaka requires concerted efforts from government authorities, civil society organizations, businesses, and the wider community. By investing in infrastructure improvements, promoting sustainable practices, enhancing legal recognition, supporting entrepreneurship, fostering collaboration, promoting social inclusion, and raising awareness, Dhaka can create an enabling environment that empowers hawkers to thrive while promoting economic, social, and environmental sustainability.

Ultimately, the sustainability of Dhaka's hawker community is not only a matter of economic viability but also a reflection of the city's commitment to equity, inclusivity, and environmental stewardship. By prioritizing the needs and aspirations of hawkers and working towards a more supportive and enabling environment, Dhaka can ensure that its hawker community continues to be a vibrant and integral part of urban life for generations to come.