

Socio-Economic conditions of Railway Hawkers of Burdwan District in the state of West Bengal

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Abstract

Indian train is a big bazar on wheels. Persons who are selling, hawking or vending goods and services in the train or at the platform of a railway station are called Hawkers. They are part and parcel of the railways and everything (safety pin, food, shoe-polishing to CD player) is available from them. The study has been conducted to analyze the socio-economic conditions of railway hawkers of Burdwan (Bardhaman) District in the state of West Bengal. The working life of hawkers is explained in terms of their financial conditions, their working hours, and the issue of valuable services, legal status and contribution to the urban economy. The study is based on primary data collected from field survey during April 2013 to July 2013. 150 hawkers have been randomly selected from two important railway junction stations of Burdwan District for this study. The study shows that hawking is one of the sensitive jobs, always be active and alert with opened eye, ear and mouth and they have extremely a long working hour. It has been further found that hawkers of Bardhaman railway station are comparatively more educated, skilled and more united to establish their rights at workplace than that of Asansol. Now they are facing a lot of problems of opposition from railway authority, passengers and policemen, but their service contribution to the railways can not be ignored.

Introduction

Hawkers are identified as self-employed workers in the informal sector who sell their goods and services inside the running train or at the platform of a railway station for livelihood. West Bengal is one of the most populated states in India where majority of the people lives in rural areas and working in informal sector. In Railways, hawkers (unauthorized) are not allowed to sell their goods and services at the platform or in the running train, but due to unemployment problem, Railway looks the matter in a humanitarian ground. Various studies have already confirmed that hawkers are the most marginalized section of the urban poor and migration from rural areas are still continuing as it is one of the easiest ways of more earnings. Jumani (1991) has attempted to divide the self-employed persons into two parts; one is self-employed people from high and middle income groups and another is self-employed people from lower income groups. The second category of self-employed people includes the rickshaw pullers, hawkers, street vendors etc. Bhattacharya and De, (1987) in their study of street vendors of Calcutta explained that street vendors are those people who do not have a permanent place of their own and who offer goods and services without having proper trade license for sale from public spaces. More than 100000 street vendors are in Kolkata only. The National Classification of Occupation 1968 defines street vendors as hawkers, peddlers and pheriowalas sell different items of daily needs like vegetables, fruits sweets, cloth, utensils, electronic items and toys, on footpaths or by going from door to door. They may purchase goods from manufacturer or wholesaler or may prepare and sell their own product. According to the existing policy documents, the term urban vendors include both traders and service providers, stationary as well as mobile vendors. The characteristics and nature of jobs of railway hawkers are almost similar to street vendors. The main differences are place of work (footpath for street vendors and platform for railway hawkers) and nature of goods (mainly uncooked goods for street vendors and cooked or ready to eat food for railway hawkers).

Bardhaman and Asansol are the two most important railway junction stations after Howrah and Sealdah in West Bengal where a large number of both local and express trains are moved and hawkers are available in 24 hours due to its geographical location and infrastructural facilities. In railways, both at platform and in the running train we can find more food items being served by hawkers (unauthorized) than the licensed staff of pantry car or the authorized stall at railway stations. Sometimes we see very well and hygienic foods available with hawkers than the foods provided by the railways or the contractors appointed by the railways for this purpose. There are so many trains without pantry or food services where the hawkers are only the source of food for the passengers. The Indian trains are known to be running extraordinarily late and in that case pantry services stop providing food; in such

scenario again one has to depend on hawkers. Although there is some opposition from passengers regarding noise, bargaining for price, forcefully entry in reserved and AC coaches etc. But, the important role of hawkers can not be ignored in the economic activities of the said two towns. In view of these discussions, the objectives of the present study can be discussed as follows:

1. To understand the working life of the rickshaw hawkers in respect of level of income, working hours and reasons behind the selection of this job;
2. To understand the socio-demographic status and previous occupations of the hawkers;
3. To analyze the socio-economic conditions of the hawkers;
4. To explore the issues regarding their working conditions and their rights at work place;
5. To understand the role of collective bargaining in formulating and realizing their demands at the work place; and
6. To make a comparative analysis for a concrete conclusion.

Background of the study

Burdwan is a developed district in terms of education, agriculture, industry and mineral resources. It is situated at the centre of South Bengal and both railways and roadways communications are developed. Two important railway junction stations Barddhaman and Asansol of the Eastern Railway are the main communication centre of this district. Eastern and southern part of this district is developed for agriculture and business, whereas western and northern part of this district is developed for industry and mineral resources. Burdwan district has a population of 717563 out of which 3966889 are male and 3750674 are female and the literacy rate is 76.21 out of which 82.42 is male literacy and 69.63 is female literacy as per census 2011. Barddhaman (urban agglomeration) has a population of 347016 out of which 177055 are male and 169961 are female, whereas Asansol (urban agglomeration) has a population of 1243008 out of which 647831 are male and 595177 are female. Besides, a large number of migrants coming from neighbor districts like Bankura, Purulia, Birbhum and even if from neighbour states like Bihar and Jharkhand were settled here for livelihood. Barddhaman, the district headquarter is an important junction station connecting Durgapur-Asansol, Bolepur-Rampurhat, Balgona-Katwa, Howrah Main and Howrah Cord line route. Asansol, the Railway Divisional headquarter is an important junction station connecting Durgapur-Barddhaman, Dhanbad-Mughalsarai, Patna-Mughalsarai and Purulia-Adra rail route. About 280 trains including local trains of 120 and 150 trains including local trains of 40 are moved from Barddhaman and Asansol stations respectively (source: railway website). Barddhaman-Asansol rail route is one the busiest rail route in India and more than 300000 passengers are moved daily through these two junction stations.

Methodology

The study is based on primary data. To achieve the objectives of the study, primary data has been collected through the well tested structured questionnaire and personal interviewed from 150 (75 from Barddhaman and 75 from Asansol) unauthorized hawkers. Both closed and open-ended questions are included in the questionnaire. Open-ended questions have been used to assist in exploring the current situation. One group session has been conducted with four to five hawkers in each study area to understand the common issues.

More than 5000 and more than 3000 hawkers are registered under different trade unions in Barddhaman and Asansol respectively. Sometimes, survey has been made in the union office to know the legal status and collective demands for recognition at workplace. After collecting data, it has been tabulated and analyzed using descriptive statistics to find out the findings of the present study.

Results and Findings

This study shows that hawking is dominated by young people in survey stations, 78.7% for Barddhaman, 72% for Asansol and in composite 75.3% between age group 15 to 30yrs. and 30 to 45yrs. As shown in Table: 1. In terms of religion, about 82.7% are Hindus, 12% are Muslims and 5.3% are Christians for Barddhaman, while about 72% are Hindus, 21.3% are Muslims and 6.7% are Christians for Asansol. In terms of caste composition, about 33.3% are belonging to General, 45.4% are belonging to SC, 5.3% and 16% are belonging to ST and OBC respectively for Barddhaman, while about 28% are belonging to General, 40% are belonging to SC, 8% and 24% are belonging to

ST and OBC respectively for Asansol. In terms of migration, about 21.3% are migrated and about 78.7% are not migrated for Barddhaman, while about 46.7% are migrated and 53.3% are not migrated for Asansol.

The education level among hawkers is generally low as shown in Table:1, although Burdwan district is educationally a developed district. In terms of education 8% of hawkers are illiterate, 13.3% have acquired primary education, 37.3% up to class VIII, 26.7% and 10.7% for MP and HS respectively and only 4% have acquired graduate & above for Barddhaman. Whereas 16% of hawkers are illiterate, 21.3% have acquired primary education, 33.3% up to class VIII, 18.7% and 9.3% for MP and HS respectively and only 1.3% have acquired graduate & above for Asansol.

It has been observed that about 77.3% of hawkers are working at platform and 22.3% (16% local and 6.3% mail/exp.) in the running train for Barddhaman, while 62.7% and 37.3% (12% local and 25.3% mail/exp.) of hawkers are working at platform and in the running train respectively for Asansol.

The education level of hawkers of Barddhaman is comparatively higher than that of Asansol and in respect of work place, both hawkers of Barddhaman and Asansol prefer more to work at platform rather to work in the running train. Hawkers of Asansol prefer more to work in the running train (mail/exp.) in 25.3% cases as compared to Barddhaman (only 6.7% cases).

Table: 1
Socio-demographic profile of the Respondents (Total N=150)
Barddhaman (N=75) and Asansol (N=75)

Indicators		Barddhaman	%	Asansol	%	Total	%
Religion	Hindu	62	82.7	54	72	116	77.3
	Muslim	9	12	16	21.3	25	16.7
	Christian	4	5.3	5	6.7	9	6
Age Group(years)	15-30	27	36	29	38.7	56	37.3
	30-45	32	42.7	25	33.3	57	38
	45-60	12	16	15	20	27	18
	Above 60	4	5.3	6	8	10	6.7
Marital Status	Married	51	68	55	73.4	106	70.7
	Unmarried	22	29.3	16	21.3	38	25.3
	Widowed	2	2.7	4	5.3	6	4
Literacy	Literate	69	92	63	84	132	88
	Illiterate	6	8	12	16	18	12
Education Level	Primary	10	13.3	16	21.3	26	17.3
	Up to class VIII	28	37.3	25	33.3	53	35.3
	MP	20	26.7	14	18.7	34	22.7
	HS	8	10.7	7	9.3	15	10
	Graduate and above	3	4	1	1.3	4	2.7
Caste	Gen	25	33.3	21	28	46	30.7
	SC	34	45.4	30	40	64	42.7
	ST	4	5.3	6	8	10	6.7
	OBC	12	16	18	24	30	20
Migration	Migrated	16	21.3	35	46.7	51	34
	Not Migrated	59	78.7	40	53.3	99	66
Place of work	At Platform	58	77.3	47	62.7	105	70
	In the Running Train	17	22.7	28	37.3	45	30
Nature of Train	Local/Passenger	12	16	9	12	21	14
	Mail/Express	5	6.7	19	25.3	24	15.7

Source: Based on Primary Survey.

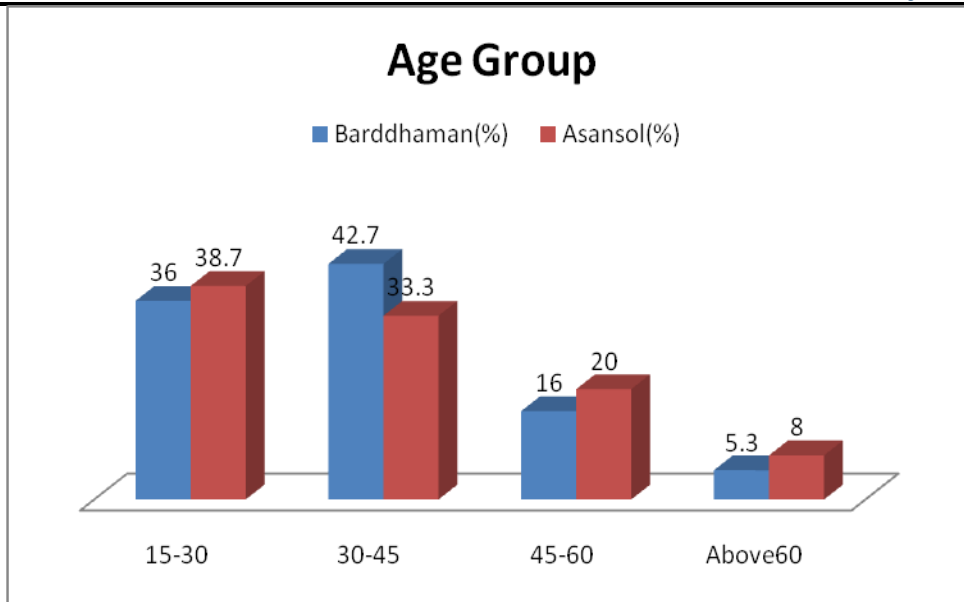


Fig:1. Percentage share of Age Group

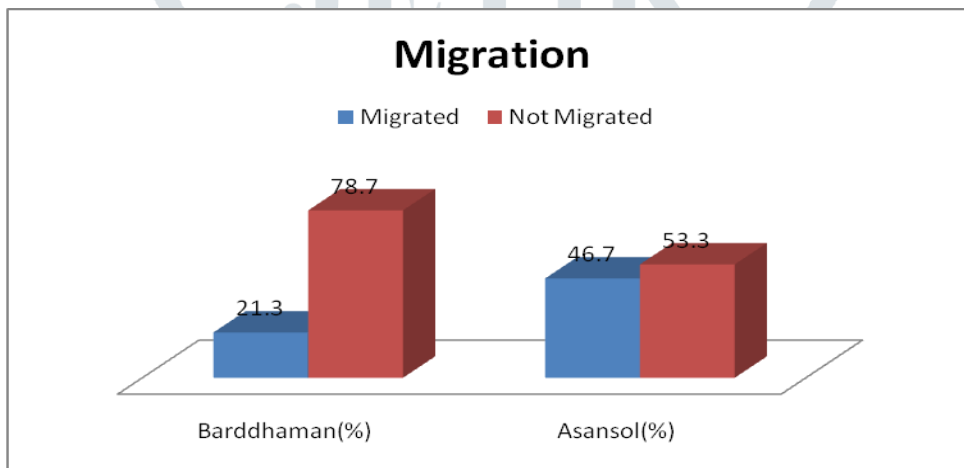


Fig:2. Percentage share of Migration

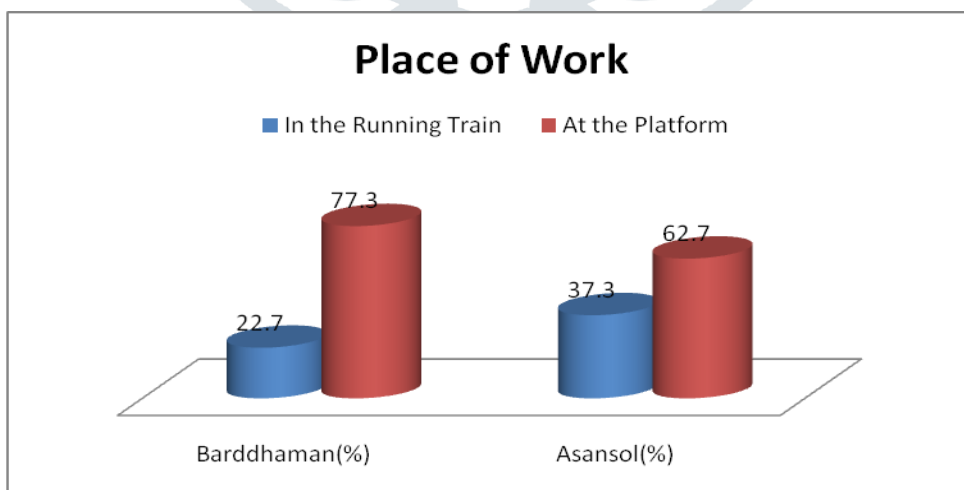


Fig:3. Percentage share of Place of Work

It has been observed that five major items (in combined) occupy about 75% of the total goods and services. Five major items are Tea/Coffee (32%), Roti/Puri-Sabji (10.7%), Boiled Egg (9.3%), Masala Muri/Chana (10.7%) and Bottle Water, cold-drinks (11.3%). Tea/Coffee has occupied the major share 29.3% and 34.7% for Barddhaman and

Asansol respectively. Passengers are very much habituated to take Tea/Coffee rather than other items as it is fresh, cheap, healthy, satisfactory and more energetic as compared to other items. Although almost everything is available in the train or at the platform, but passengers prefer tea/coffee in all seasons.

Table: 2
Type of goods and services provided by the respondents (Total N=150)
Barddhaman (N=75) and Asansol (N=75)

Items	Barddhaman	%	Asansol	%	Total	%
Tea/Coffee	22	29.3	26	34.7	48	32
Roti/Puri-Sabji	9	12	7	9.3	16	10.7
Boiled egg	6	8	8	10.7	14	9.3
Masala Muri/Chana	7	9.3	9	12.2	16	10.7
Bottled Water, cold-drinks	7	9.3	10	13.3	17	11.3
Fruits	3	4	2	2.7	5	3.3
Sweets	2	2.7	1	1.3	3	2
Chips, Nut,Bhujia	3	4	3	4	6	4
Newspaper	3	4	1	1.3	4	2.7
Books, Patrika	2	2.7	1	1.3	3	2
Safetypin,lock&key	2	2.7	2	2.7	4	2.7
Shoks, towels, Handcarchin	3	4	1	1.3	4	2.7
Shoe polishing	2	2.7	1	1.3	3	2
Electronics items,toys	2	2.7	1	1.3	3	2
Medicine items	2	2.7	2	2.7	4	2.7

Source: Based on Primary Survey.

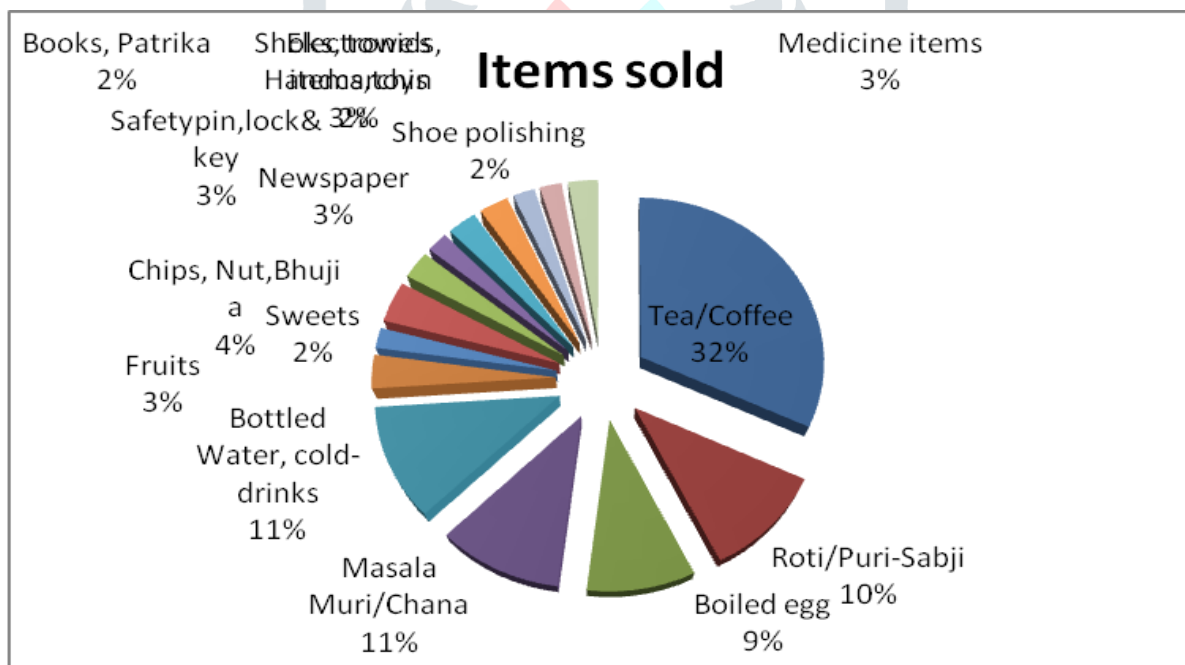


Fig.4. Percentage share of major items sold (in Total)

It has been observed that most of the hawkers are belonging to a nuclear family, 82.7% and 76% in Barddhaman and Asansol respectively as shown in Table: 3. Family members of hawkers are medium 46.7% and 50% for Barddhaman and Asansol respectively. Poverty and lack of education are the reasons behind it.

Table: 3
Type of Family and Family Size of the Respondents (N=150)
Barddhaman (N=75) and Asansol (N=75)

Type of Family	Barddhaman	%	Asansol	%	Total	%
Joint	13	17.3	18	24	33	22
Nuclear	62	82.7	57	76	119	79.3
Family Size						
Small (up to 2 children)	22	29.3	13	17.3	35	23.3
Medium (up to 4 children)	35	46.7	38	50.7	73	48.7
Large (more than 4 children)	5	6.7	6	8	11	7.3

Source: Based on Primary Survey.

To know the socioeconomic conditions of the hawkers it is necessary to analysis the previous occupation. Table: 4 shows that 24% of the hawkers are agricultural labours, where Construction labours (18%), Street Vendors and Night guard (7.3%) in each case, Helpers in hotel-restaurant (12.7%), Factory workers (14.7%), non-workers (9.3%), Coolie (4%) and Farmers (2%) in combined. It has been observed that majority of hawkers are coming from Agricultural labours in 29.3% cases in Barddhaman whereas, majority of hawkers are coming from Factory workers in 20% cases in Asansol. Barddhaman is situated in agricultural area and Asansol is situated in industrial area. Excess agricultural labours and excess/lock-out factory workers have chosen this job for livelihood.

Table: 4
Previous occupation (if any) of the Respondents (N=150)
Barddhaman (N=75) and Asansol (N=75)

Occupations	Barddhaman	%	Asansol	%	Total	%
Agricultural labours	22	29.3	14	18.7	36	24
Farmers	2	2.7	1	1.3	3	2
Factory workers	7	9.3	15	20	22	14.7
Coolie	3	4	4	5.3	7	4.7
Street Vendors	8	10.7	3	4	11	7.3
Night guard	5	6.7	6	8	11	7.3
Construction labours	12	16	15	20	27	18
Helpers in Hotel, Restaurant	12	16	7	9.3	19	12.7
No Previous Occupation	4	5.3	10	13.3	14	9.3

Source: Based on Primary Survey.

The study shows that mainly due to poverty, unemployment, lock-out of factory and high-income opportunities; both rural and urban poor have selected this job as indicated in Table: 5. Poverty (37.3%) and lock-out (18.7%) in Asansol are higher as compared to Barddhaman (28% and 9.3% respectively). While, unemployment (29.3%) in Barddhaman is higher than that of Asansol (13.3%). Both rural and urban poor want to find job nearby home and during all seasons. Agricultural activities being seasonal and uncertain factory workers have nothing alternatives but to accept this job for livelihood.

Table: 5
Causes for selection of this job of the Respondents (N=150)
Barddhaman (N=75) and Asansol (N=75)

Causes	Barddhaman	%	Asansol	%	Total	%
Poverty	21	28	28	37.3	49	32.7
Freedom of jobs	7	9.3	6	8	13	8.7

Unemployment	22	29.3	10	13.3	32	21.3
Lock-out of factory	7	9.3	14	18.7	21	14
Inadequacy of capital	5	6.7	4	5.3	9	6
High income opportunities	7	9.3	8	10.7	15	10
Easiest way of earnings nearby home	4	5.3	2	2.7	6	4
Others	2	2.7	3	4	5	3.3

Source: Based on Primary Survey.

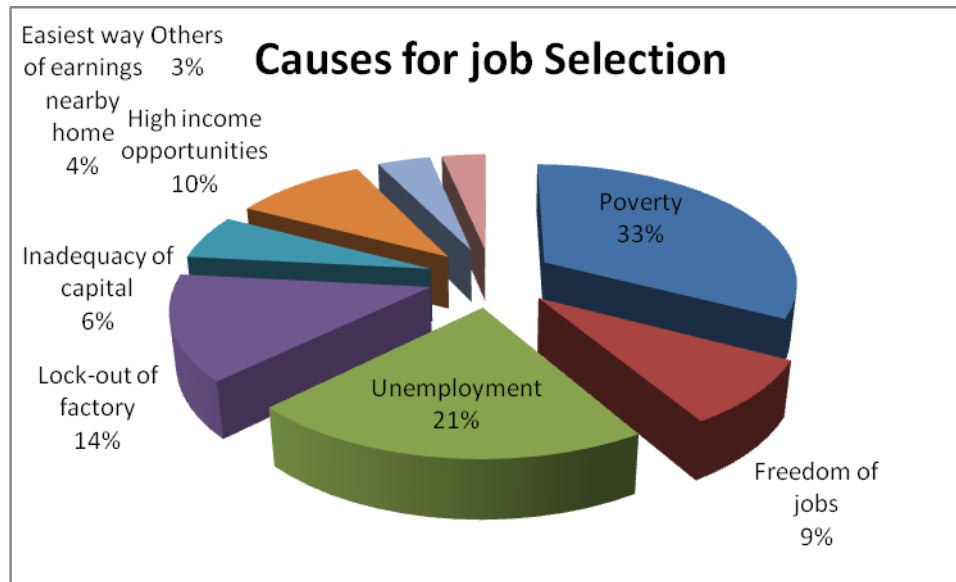


Fig:5. Percentage share of causes for job selection (in Total)

The status of hawkers in the society can be assessed only after the assessment of income and expenditure of the hawkers. Hawkers in Barddhaman are earning more in 42.7% cases (Rs. 5000-Rs.7000) and in 18.7% cases (above Rs.7000) as compared to Asansol in 37.3% and 6.7% cases respectively as indicated in Table: 6. While, hawkers in Asansol are earning less amount in 8% cases (below Rs. 3000) and in 48% cases (Rs.3000- Rs.5000) as compared to Barddhaman in 5.3% and 33.3% cases respectively.

In terms of expenditure hawkers in Barddhaman are incurring more in 85.3% cases (Rs.3000-5000 and Rs.5000-7000) as compared to Asansol in 76% cases (Rs.3000-5000 and Rs.5000-7000). A few per cent of hawkers can save some money.

Table: 6
Monthly Income and Expenditure of the Respondents (N=150)
Barddhaman (N=75) and Asansol (N=75)

Income in Rs	Barddhaman	Percentage	Asansol	Percentage	Total	Percentage
Below 3000	4	5.3	6	8	10	6.7
3000-5000	25	33.3	36	48	61	40.7
5000-7000	32	42.7	28	37.3	60	40
Above 7000	14	18.7	5	6.7	19	12.7
Expenditure in Rs						
Below 3000	3	4	15	20	18	12
3000-5000	36	48	35	46.7	71	47.3
5000-7000	28	37.3	22	29.3	50	33.3
Above 7000	8	10.7	3	4	11	7.3

Source: Based on Primary Survey.

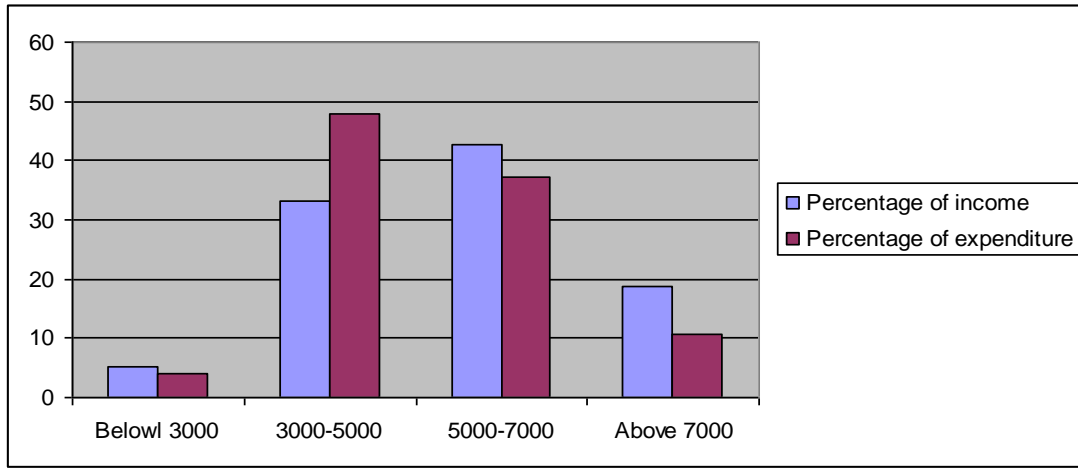


Fig.6. Percentage of Income and Expenditure of the Respondents in Barddhaman

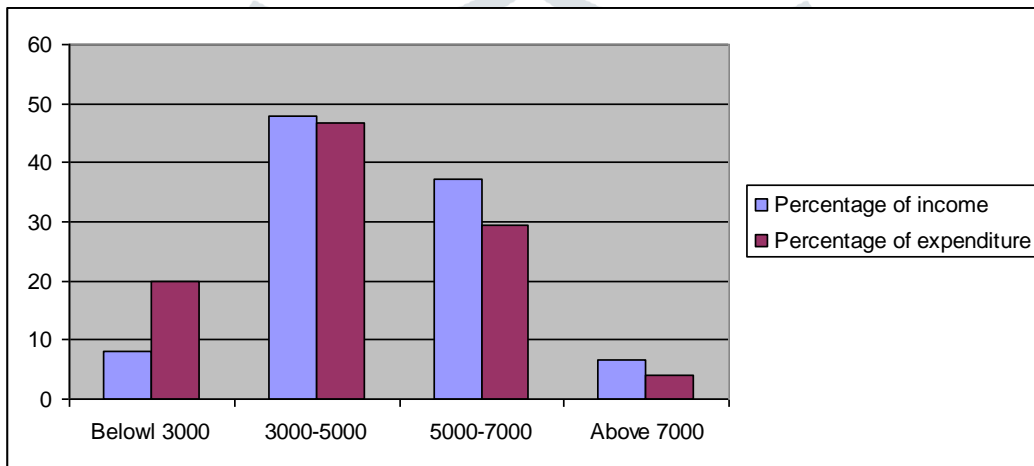


Fig.7. Percentage of Income and Expenditure of the Respondents in Asansol

The study shows that hawkers in Asansol have long working hours 34.7% (8-12 hrs.) and 20% (above 12 hrs.) as compared to Barddhaman 26.7% and 5.3% respectively. Number of train and passengers’ movement and high-income opportunities are the reasons behind it.

Table: 7
Working Hours per day of the Respondents (N=150)
Barddhaman (N=75) and Asansol (N=75)

Working Hours	Barddhaman	Percentage	Asansol	Percentage	Total	Percentage
2-5	15	20	6	8	21	14
5-8	36	48	28	37.3	64	42.7
8-12	20	26.7	26	34.7	46	30.7
Above 12	4	5.3	15	20	19	12.7

Source: Based on Primary Survey.

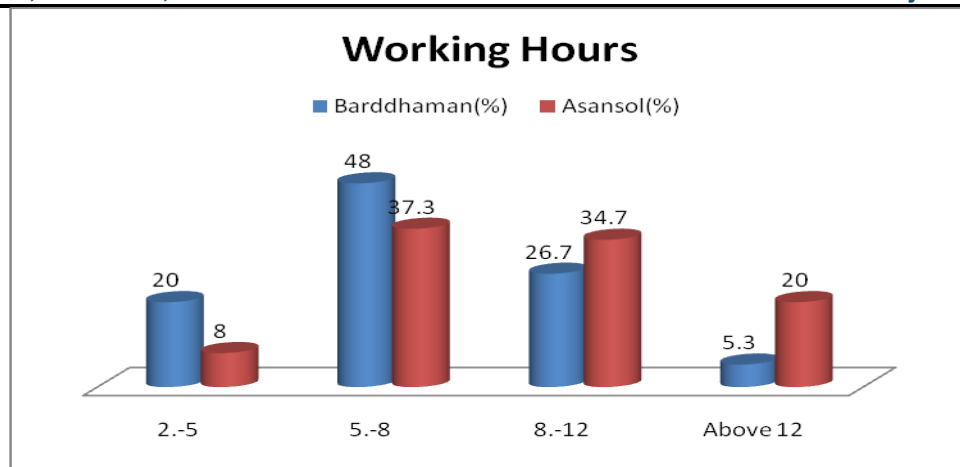


Fig:8. Percentage share of Working Hours of the Respondents in Barddhaman and Asansol

Article 19(1)(g) gives the Indian citizen a fundamental right to practice any profession, or to carry on any occupation, trade or business. This right is limited only by the right of the Indian Government, to prescribe professional or technical qualifications for certain trades or professions, and right of the State to create monopolies in certain trade, business or industry in the interest of the general public. Otherwise a citizen's right to carry on a trade or profession of his choice is absolute.

But in Railways, hawkers (unauthorized) are not allowed to sell their goods and services at the platform or in the running train, but due to unemployment problem Railway looks the matter in a humanitarian ground. Hawkers are registered themselves under different trade unions and united themselves to do this work. They are demanding for license, hawking place, PF & insurance etc. for a long period of time but unfortunately nothing still been achieved and for any common problem they are united for their existence as indicated in Table: 8A and Table: 8B.

Table: 8A

Legal Status, Demands and power of Bargaining of the Respondents of Barddhaman (N=75)

	Yes	%	No	%
Demand for License	75	100	0	0
Demand for PF, Group Insurance	40	53.3	35	46.7
Demand for hawking place at Platform	18	24	57	76
Always go to Union Office	62	82.7	13	17.3
Sometimes go to Union Office	13	17.3	62	82.7
United for Group Problem	75	100	0	0
United for any Individual problem	65	86.7	10	13.3

Source: Based on Primary Survey.

Table: 8B

Legal Status, Demands and power of Bargaining of the Respondents Asansol (N=75)

	Yes	%	No	%
Demand for License	75	100	0	0
Demand for PF, Group Insurance	26	34.7	49	65.3

Demand for hawking place at Platform	12	16	53	70.7
Always go to Union Office	45	60	30	40
Sometimes go to Union Office	30	40	45	60
United for Group Problem	56	74.7	19	25.3
United for any Individual problem	42	56	23	30.7

Source: Based on Primary Survey.

Hawkers being unauthorized, they are facing a lot of problems from different corners like passengers, police, RPF, IRCTC vendors and other inter-class hawkers. Problems arising from passengers for cost of goods, quality, noise and disturbance movement with luggage etc in 39.6% cases in combined as indicated in Table: 9. As they are registered under different trade unions they are more competitive rather than co-operative in 28.6% cases in combined.

Table: 9
Problems faced at workplace of the Respondents (N=150)
Bardhaman (N=75) and Asansol (N=75)

Problems faced	Bardhaman	%	Asansol	%	Total	%
From passengers (price,noise,movement etc.)	25	33.3	36	48	61	39.6
From GRP,RPF	10	13.3	19	25.3	29	18.8
From IRCTC,Authorized vendors	8	10.7	12	16	20	12.9
From inter-class hawkers	12	16	32	42.7	44	28.6

Source: Based on Primary Survey.

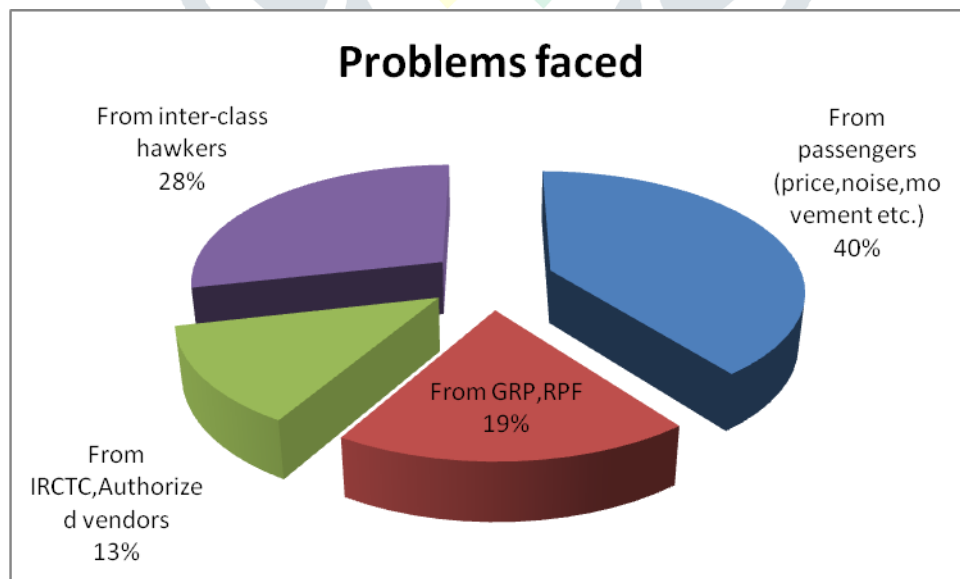


Fig:9. Problems faced at workplace in Total

Hawking is a laborious and busy work and always shouting in high volume for passengers' attraction, therefore hawkers are suffering from several diseases. About 50% in combined are suffering from digestive problem, 14.7% and 14% for mussel's pain and asthma respectively.

Table: 10
Type of Health Problems of the Respondents (N=150)
Barddhaman (N=75) and Asansol (N=75)

	Barddhaman	Percentage	Asansol	Percentage	Total	Percentage
At least one Disease	18	24	25	33.3	43	28.7
Back Pain	4	5.3	6	8	10	6.7
Mussel's Pain	10	13.3	12	16	22	14.7
Blood pressure	8	10.7	9	12	17	11.3
Diabetes	6	8	10	13.3	16	10.7
Digestive problem	35	46.7	40	53.3	75	50
Eyesight problem	6	8	8	10.7	14	9.3
Asthma	5	6.7	16	21.3	21	14
Others	6	8	9	12	15	10

Source: Based on Primary Survey.

Conclusion

The findings of the study reveal that most of the hawkers have come from the marginalized section of the society and it is an easy way of earnings. Although hawkers are unauthorized and create several problems, but the role of hawkers in providing various services specially bottled water and tea/snacks to Indian Railways can not be ignored. Hawkers providing fresh goods at cheap and innovative too. Services provided by IRCTC and authorized food stall are not satisfactory. Most of the hawkers exhibit excellent business skills. Though their education level is low but, they have picked up an extraordinary talent to convince a person to buy any goods. The Indian trains are known to be running extraordinarily late, only hawkers can satisfy the needs and demands of the passenger.

Hawkers not only sell goods but also provide valuable current train information to the passengers. A passenger trusts more on hawkers for current information of train rather than the person on duty in the enquiry counter – this is the ground reality. The main problem is that the number of hawkers is increasing day by day and inter-class clashes occur regularly.

Railways may be benefited from hawkers by issuing license or card with minimum fees per annum and may restrict for a number of trains a hawker can cover and time limit per train per day. Railways owned product (bottled water) can easily sold by the hawkers. Hawking area at platform may be constructed where a large number of food stall and hawkers will be available for sale of goods and inter-class clashes can be avoided. As this occupation requires more physical energy and power of movement therefore, it does not make their life economically sufficient in long run. Hence, financial stability of the hawkers has not been achieved so far. Railways, State Govt. and NGOs should take steps to improve this sector and make attention to those people who are involved in this sector by providing license, coverage of Insurance and PF, healthcare, SHGs-microfinance, hawking area, accidental benefit, old age pension etc. Awareness programme like control of tobacco use, lottery ticket purchase, gambling, savings in chit fund, family planning etc. may help them to develop their life in the society.

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