

Gender, caste, and street vending in India: Towards an intersectional geography

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ARTICLE

Gender, caste, and street vending in India: Towards an intersectional geography

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Abstract

Through an analysis of the available literature on women street vendors in the Global South, and then specifically in India, this paper identifies several knowledge gaps and future directions for research. The paper makes three broad claims: (1) street vending spaces are fundamentally gendered spaces; (2) the intersectional identities and caste-based locations of women street vendors shape their spatial experiences, material realities and access to power; and (3) gender and caste are co-constituted categories that produce a spatiality unique to the Indian subcontinent. While the geographical approach towards street vending recognises the importance of space and considers vendors as spatial practitioners, vendors are often assumed to belong to a homogenous (male) category with differentials such as gender, race, age, ethnicity and caste invisibilised. This research gap is of even more critical importance in India where caste intersects with gender to produce space. Examining the literature on gender and street vending reveals three broad analytical themes—socio-spatial disparities, politics of space, and strategies of control. What seems to be missing is a critical, qualitative focus on the experiences of women street vendors, the gendering of vending spaces, the recognition of caste as a dynamic factor, and a spatial analysis grounded in the Southern urban context. Ultimately, this paper makes the case for a situated and postcolonial feminist geography approach to street vending in India, and calls for an intersectional research agenda that is attentive to the co-constitution of caste and gender in the production of urban space.

KEYWORDS

caste, feminist geography, gender, India, intersectionality, street vending

1 | INTRODUCTION

Significant work on street vendors has taken place in disciplines such as sociology and anthropology, which tend to view vending through a political economy or cultural lens. This provides us with rich ethnographic detail and socio-political context, and covering themes such as livelihoods, informality, market culture, identity, conflict with the state, everyday

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customer interactions, vending strategies, and so forth (Anjaria, 2016; Duneier, 2001; Goldstein, 2016; Kapchan, 2001; Milgram, 2013). Meanwhile, in geography and urban studies, street vending is conceptualised as a spatial practice, and vendors as producers of urban space (Bandyopadhyay, 2022; Lindell, 2019; Luthra & Monteith, 2021; Palat Narayanan, 2022) offering us a critical spatial perspective that is sometimes missing from other works. Several of these studies also use visual and spatial methods such as GPS tools and solicited journals in order to understand the power relations embedded in vending spaces (Eidse & Turner, 2014; Salvidge, 2022).

However, while the geographical approach towards vending recognises the importance of space, vendors are often assumed to belong to a homogenous (male) category with differentials such as gender, race, age, ethnicity and caste invisibilised. One such case is that of women street vendors. While there is a growing body of anthropological work centring gender, especially in the Global South, why has geography—particularly feminist geography—fallen behind?

This knowledge gap is of even more critical importance in India, where, despite their high participation in the informal sector, women are numerically and culturally less prominent in street vending spaces as compared to their Southern counterparts. As the following literature review sections show, the visibility of women vendors in certain countries can be explained by the specific material and historical contexts of those regions, so it stands to reason that there must also be a similarly contextual explanation for the relative invisibilisation of women vendors in India; that is, the co-constitution of caste and gender producing a set of socio-spatial power relations that are unique to the subcontinent. The racialising effect of caste (as a system of graded inequality which fundamentally and materially shapes Indian society) and the mechanism of its perpetuation—land, labour and control over women—points to the inextricable link between space, gender and caste (Ambedkar, 1979; Chakravarti, 2018). Since Indian vendors are situated at this intersection of caste, gender and space, I argue that this is what sets their case apart from that of spatial politics in other Southern countries.

However, the literature on street vending in India has not paid sufficient attention to gender and caste as mutually constituted spatial categories. Instead, it largely tends to focus on issues such as informality, legality, socioeconomic and health challenges, the ‘battle’ over public space, and political representation (Anjaria, 2016; Bandyopadhyay, 2022; Bhowmik & Saha, 2012; Goswami, 2015; Luthra & Monteith, 2021; Schindler, 2016). Examining the literature on gender and vending in India reveals three broad analytical themes—socio-spatial disparities, politics of space, and strategies of control. What seems to be missing is a critical, qualitative focus on the experiences of women street vendors, the gendering of vending spaces, the recognition of caste as a dynamic factor, and a spatial analysis grounded in the Southern urban context. What we need then is to build upon ‘situated intersectionality’ (Yuval-Davis, 2015) and ‘postcolonial intersectionality’ (Mollett & Faria, 2018) to yield an intersectional feminist geography approach that is attentive to the situated gazes of women vendors, within a material context of interlocking power structures and socio-spatial realities. Addressing the gap through this lens could also contribute towards our knowledge on the complex (and oft understudied) relation between gender, caste and space in India, and ultimately, advance our understanding of street vending as a spatial practice producing a set of power relations stretched over space. This gap requires urgent political consideration as well. Pressing questions remain about whether the relatively low representation, lack of political participation, and policy inattention towards women in vending are linked to religious, caste and gender norms that produce vending spaces in urban India.

Thus, this paper calls for increased conceptual engagement and political attention on three fronts to further our knowledge of street vending spaces in India: (1) street vending spaces as fundamentally gendered; (2) how the intersectional identities and social locations of women vendors shape their spatial experiences, material realities, and access to power; and (3) gender and caste as co-constituted categories that produce a spatiality unique to the Indian subcontinent. This is carried out as follows. I begin with an overview of the existing literature on women street vendors in the Global South, identifying common thematic elements, and concentrating on bringing out a spatial perspective. Then I critically analyse the India-specific literature and point out the research gaps, particularly focusing on situating the experiences of women vendors in the caste-based and gendered production of urban space. The subsequent conceptual framework section makes the case for a situated and postcolonial intersectional feminist geography approach. The paper then concludes by pointing to the potential for future research and the need for critical engagement on that intersection.

2 | WOMEN STREET VENDORS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Across the Global South, the majority of street vendors tend to be women, and especially in the case of street food stalls, the number of women owners/operators reaches figures as high as 70%–90% (Kusakabe, 2010; Roever, 2010; Skinner, 2010). Culturally as well, women dominate the popular imagination of Southern markets, such as the *Baianas* in Brazil, food vendors in Southeast Asia, and the ‘market women’ of Latin America (Goldstein, 2016; Milgram, 2013;

Seligmann, 2004). The academic literature on women vendors reflects this geographical distribution, with most of the research concentrating on South America, followed by Southeast Asia and parts of Africa. The rest of this section discusses the most prominent themes that emerge from this literature.

2.1 | Cultural histories of vending

Numerous scholars have explained women's participation in street vending through the specific histories and cultural norms of those regions. These include a culture that encourages Asante women in Ghana to express maternal devotion by taking up paid work outside the home (Clark, 1999); customs of bilateral descent and primogeniture along with the historical role of women as household financial managers in Philippines (Milgram, 2013); the presence of matrilineal societies in West Africa (Skinner, 2010); and the colonial construction of marketing as 'women's work' in Java (Alexander & Alexander, 2001). The prevalence of women street vendors can also be due to certain historical factors, such as feudal systems in Thailand (Nirathron, 2010) and Imphal, India (Ghosh, 2021) that conscripted men to serve in court, leaving the women to turn to street vending in order to maintain their households.

2.2 | Livelihood disparities

However, even if certain culturally specific histories make it possible for women vendors to dominate over men in terms of numbers, it does not always translate into a better livelihood. Across the Global South, women tend to be involved in those areas of trade that are less profitable, rely more on informal sources of credit with higher rates of interest, have lower capital to invest, sell perishable and less lucrative items, face gender-based violence that risks their livelihood, and have lesser time to devote to vending because of never-ending carework (Bhowmik & Saha, 2012; Roever, 2010; Skinner, 2010). Not only is access to supply chains and wholesale markets gendered, there are also cultural expectations around what women are 'supposed' to sell, resulting in lower perceived value of their labour (Bass, 2000) and the invisibilisation of their behind-the-scenes work (Ghosh, 2021). Selling strategies also tend to be culturally shaped, with women vendors drawing upon their 'feminine authority' of motherhood, traditional wisdom, and so forth to attract customers, in contrast to men deriving authority from 'rational' arguments and formal education (Kapchan, 2001).

2.3 | Politics of space

The spatial affordances of street vending are gendered in nature, and determine not just the nature of vending livelihoods but also the decision to take up vending in the first place. Men who vend tend to be more mobile, often selling out of carts or wheelbarrows, which affords them more flexibility in gaining customers and evading authorities; whereas women tend to stay put, as selling cooked food requires complicated handling and transport (Cupers, 2015). Women are expected to juggle housework with paid work and thus choose to vend from sites closer to home, vend for lesser time, or bring their children with them while vending, often transforming public spaces into domestic spaces (Bass, 2000), which might be why women tend to prefer vending on the street rather than a fixed stall. Another spatial strategy adopted by women is to expand their customer base by creating a spatial network of stalls tied together by kinship (Seligmann, 2004). Recognising that the material reality and social experiences of women influence the way they produce and navigate space also helps us reconceptualise market spaces through their embodied work, thus challenging the dominant modes of production and spatialising the gendered costs of neoliberal reforms (Maclean, 2014).

2.4 | Access to power

We can also find a variety of gendered relations among the different levels of the market. In most Southern countries, women vendors may be more numerous on the streets, but it is the men who dominate the political leadership and the more profitable supply and wholesale chains (Maclean, 2014; Seligmann, 2004). Access to resources, time, education, as well as the presentation of authority is highly gendered, which means that women rarely have a say in vendors' negotiations with the state and find it difficult to participate in labour unions due to domestic responsibilities (Bass, 2000). Even

when women do hold significant positions in vendors' unions, their role in political mobilisation is often invisibilised or erased (Ghosh, 2021). Further, when street vending becomes a lucrative option, especially in the face of stagnating formal jobs, men tend to take over and women are pushed out even more (Bhowmik & Saha, 2012; Skinner, 2010), consequently deploying cultural norms that view men holding leadership positions as compensation for the supposed 'humiliation' of doing a woman's job (Goldstein, 2016).

Therefore, we can see that the literature on street vending in the South tends to focus on what makes the lives of women vendors unique, and the specific material and cultural contexts that shape their vending spaces. Race as an analytic appears in works that study indigenous women vendors in South America (Goldstein, 2016; Seligmann, 2004) or immigrant food vendors in the West (Cupers, 2015), but the intersectional analyses within the broader scholarship largely fall under gender and class. Additionally, the examination of gender tends to be limited to delineating the experiences of women vendors from men, without seemingly interrogating gender as a power structure that co-constitutes space. For these reasons, an intersectional feminist geography approach would be useful here to get the full picture of how urban vending spaces are produced.

3 | WOMEN STREET VENDORS IN INDIA

The following section forms the crux of the paper and make a case for why there is a need for increased attention on gender and street vending in India. I begin with providing a context to vending in India and identifying the most common themes in the scholarship, which includes spatial disparities in markets, the gendered private and public divide, and the different strategies that women develop to navigate the gendered anxieties around vending. This is accompanied by a critical look at the silences in the literature, and a call for a research agenda that is attentive to the co-constitution of caste and gender in producing urban space.

3.1 | The vending context in India

As we have seen in the previous section, despite the many challenges they face, women vendors occupy a central position in the streetscapes of Southern cities. Street vending in India, on the other hand, conjures up images of peanut sellers, cobblers, chai vendors, vegetable cart pullers, second-hand book sellers, and so forth, all of whom tend to be men. Despite their significant participation in the informal sector, Indian women are disproportionately under-represented in street vending, making up only 30% of all street vendors (Bhowmik & Saha, 2012), except for in some Northeastern cities like Imphal (88.5%). Indian women's participation in vending is, thus, significantly lower and culturally less prominent compared with their Southern counterparts.

While specific feudal traditions explain the historical practice of women vending in large numbers in Imphal (Ghosh, 2021), the cultural and material contexts in other regions might then be linked to the relative invisibilisation of women vendors. For instance, ideologies about space determine access to public space, the 'appropriate' use of public space, and the very production of space. In Kenya, where women's mobility is expected to serve only domestic purposes, the movements of a woman vendor are considered 'immoral' (Kinyanjui, 2014). In many South American countries, where vendors tend to be rural indigenous women, racial anxieties intersect with gender norms to police the women 'guilty' of transgressing boundaries of race, class and status (Goldstein, 2016; Seligmann, 2004). Similarly, in India, the very presence of women street vendors invokes a double sense of being 'out of place'—as a vendor 'encroaching' upon public space, and as a woman challenging the patriarchal construction of the public versus private divide (Anjaria, 2016). Her intersectional location, then, also results in certain complicated gendered narratives around her work. Scholars have noted the sense of dignity and empowerment often experienced by women vendors (Guha et al., 2022) and the productive capacity and urban expertise of their labour (Aggarwal & Bedi, 2022), while at the same time critically examining how the perception of street vending as an extension of their 'natural' domestic roles could result in their invisibilisation from spheres of policy-making and influence (Kusakabe, 2010).

I propose another complication to this discussion: the co-constitution of caste and gender in producing a spatiality unique to India. I argue that it is this power structure that weaves through public-facing work such as street vending; mediates women's access to public space and networks of power; determines the accumulation of relational ties that make their livelihood possible (Aggarwal & Bedi, 2022); shapes their discursive image within the community, media, popular and policy landscape; influences women's 'public behaviour' (Lessinger, 2001); and also acts as a kind of self-regulating

policing mechanism and identity formation (Aswathy & Kalpana, 2019). However, urban studies as a field is seldom attentive to the role of these interlocking mutually constituted categories in the production of vending spaces in India. The next few sections cover the broad themes present in the literature, critically analyse the gaps, and point to the need for an intersectional feminist geography approach that is built upon the situated experiences of women vendors and the postcolonial relations that produce their vending spaces.

3.2 | Socio-spatial disparities

In India, women vendors tend to have the least desirable sites (such as next to toilets), occupy less prominent spots on footpaths, and are more numerous in declining markets (Lessinger, 2001). Even within this group, older, single or widowed women are often relegated to the peripheries of the market. This also means that the same market layout might be experienced differently by men and women. The lack of civic facilities such as toilets, changing rooms, storage or drinking water in Indian markets puts an additional strain on women (AIILSG & UN Habitat, 2019).

Caste, religion, tribe and ethnicity also intersect to determine the placement of vendors within markets. As Ghosh's (2021) research on a women's market in Manipur shows, even within a 'homogenous' unionised group of women vendors, it is actually their intersectional positions that influence their access to ideal vending spots, avenues for profit, and other resources—Muslim and 'lower' caste vendors were allotted stalls at the back of the market; women from tribal communities, most of whom were not unionised, were forced to occupy the less lucrative streets outside the market, where they were more prone to police harassment; while dominant caste Hindus vended from prominent spots in the front of the market.

3.3 | Gendered spaces and strategies

The politics of public space is also highly gendered in India. Women who carry out paid work that involves labouring in the public sphere, accessing public space, and interacting with strangers are perceived as threats to the ideological separation between the private and the public—that is, between the home (women's domain, safe and pure) and the outside (men's domain, dangerous and impure). Women, when moving through public space, must then cloak themselves in a private bubble of respectability, demonstrate a legitimate purpose, and perform a kind of 'normative femininity' (Phadke et al., 2009) lest they be mistaken for someone less respectable, and thus 'deserving' of violence or shame. In the context of street vending, scholars have identified several strategies that Indian women develop in order to navigate the norms that are responsible for the production and maintenance of oppressive gendered spaces, while 'retaining [their] full range of moral prestige' (Lessinger, 2001, p. 77).

First, is the emphasis on economic necessity and vending as a last resort in the absence of other jobs, the incapacity of their husbands, or in the wake of neoliberal precarity (Aswathy & Kalpana, 2019; Lessinger, 2001). Second, women also justify the choice to take up vending by portraying themselves as self-sacrificing mothers (Lessinger, 2001), who are vending not for their own job satisfaction or for a penchant for money-making, but solely to support their families. On the other end, vending can also be viewed as a dignified livelihood, where cooking becomes central to the women's identity and the act of feeding the hungry acquires sacred meaning (Guha et al., 2022). Clearly, it is only when vending becomes an extension of their social reproductive role that women can derive a sense of pride and preserve a semblance of moral legitimacy. But this raises an important question: would the feeling of empowerment and self-esteem ascribed to vending still be the same if women were selling something that did not fall into their traditional gendered purview? A feminist approach that is attentive to intersectional realities would be useful to investigate this.

The third way women navigate the gendered anxieties around street vending is by internalising societal norms and expectations, self-policing and regulating other women, and constructing dichotomies of 'good' women and 'bad' women. These practices emerge from gendered, caste-based and religious notions of morality, chastity and propriety. For instance, women vendors in Chennai use a system of public chaperonage to safeguard their 'virtue', where the 'public gaze [is turned] from a threat to protective surveillance that can bear witness to blameless behaviour' (Lessinger, 2001, p. 93). In certain Christian fishing communities in Kerala, the increased entry of women into vending, the introduction of night markets, and the necessity of unaccompanied travel over long distances were seen as violating the ideal feminine image of an Indian domestic woman (Aswathy & Kalpana, 2019). Hence women vendors dealt with this by consciously distancing themselves from the other 'bad women' who were doing vending for the 'wrong' reasons (for profit, for male attention)

or in inappropriate ways (by flirting, wearing flashy clothes). Widows and separated women, that is, those women most likely to face the greatest scrutiny from the community, were especially likely to criticise these ‘other’ women vendors. Thus, the social control exerted over women working in and accessing the public sphere is often internalised and peer regulated by the women themselves.

In other words, vending spaces in India are infused with norms of idealised chastity, virtue and propriety that are based on local gendered and religious practices and beliefs. While it is clear that these structures work together to inscribe socio-spatial relations with a desirable kind of femininity (respectable, modest, domestic), there seems to be some questions that go unaddressed: why does this kind of a gendered relation exist in the first place? And what makes it so desirable?

3.4 | Caste and gender

I propose that we can answer these questions by paying attention to caste, as not just a Hindu religious belief system or a hierarchical division of labour, but as a historically specific power structure that produces, inscribes and influences all aspects of Indian society, including ‘secular’ spaces such as the public sphere, domestic space and street vending. As anti-caste scholars have shown, the norms of chastity, self-sacrifice, modesty and wifely virtue are upper-caste patriarchal norms that function as gendered mechanisms that exist to maintain and perpetuate the caste system (Ambedkar, 1979; Chakravarti, 2018). The possibility of upwards caste mobility makes these kinds of sociality worthy of emulation. Caste then serves as the missing link in a set of related issues: are these patriarchal norms desirable precisely because of their traditional association with an upper-caste life in India? Do other caste groups perpetuate these gendered mechanisms in a bid for upwards mobility? How does this power structure complicate the livelihoods and experiences of women such as street vendors who defy the image of a domestic woman idealised by the caste system?

In addition, it is also important to spatialise this relation of caste and gender—for not only is the caste system spatialised in its effects, it is also responsible for producing space in a way that reflects and reinforces the caste hierarchy (Crowley & Ghertner, 2022; Ranganathan, 2022). Women street vendors, who are situated at this intersection of caste, gender and public space, thus have to navigate certain social norms that might not apply to women working out of the public eye, have to adopt particular survival strategies to eke out a livelihood amidst growing precarity, and are especially vulnerable to oppression borne out of these multiple interlocking structures. And yet, the socio-spatial experiences of women vendors in India is an understudied area in urban geography. More critical engagement on this front could move the field beyond research that places street vending in analytical silos, and could lead to theorisation that considers the politics of space through an intersectional lens.

4 | TOWARDS AN INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST GEOGRAPHY

The preceding literature review sections have demonstrated the need for a research agenda that is attentive to the complex realities of women vendors in India. But why an intersectional feminist geography approach? Firstly, intersectionality has always been an inherently spatial concept. Yuval-Davis (2015) delineates the three central aspects of a situated intersectional analysis—translocality, transcalarity and transtemporality—pointing to the importance of considering the situated gazes of people in relation to their geographical, social and temporal location. To illustrate translocality, a woman vendor’s livelihood depends on things such as her living conditions and the length of her commute to the market, which in turn would be determined by her caste and class location—Mumbai, like most Indian cities, is highly stratified by caste, even at the neighbourhood level (Bharathi et al., 2021). Transcalarity comes in when we look at the woman vendor as being part of a broader supply chain that is influenced by various flows of power at different scales—home, neighbourhood, regional, national and global. And transtemporality can be seen in her relationship with the state, where cut-off dates decide whether she would be eligible for a hawking licence or considered a ‘local’ or a migrant. All these considerations work together to determine the woman vendor’s experiences.

Secondly, there is already a rich tradition of using intersectional thought within feminist geography (Mollett & Faria, 2018), so it follows that, instead of merely looking at differences, a more useful way of conceptualising vending spaces would be through questions around structural power and interlocking relations of caste, gender, class, and so forth. Mollett and Faria (2018) also extend the spatiality of intersectional theory by firmly situating it in the Southern context, with what they call ‘postcolonial intersectionality’. For a woman vendor, this means paying attention to how her occupation of public space

is situated within a planning paradigm that has historically been shaped by colonial legacies (Anjaria, 2016), and as an urban informal worker in Mumbai, examining how she is linked to global flows of capital and labour that are determined by North–South power relations, neoliberalisation, racialised ideas of development, and so forth. Indeed, the Southern turn in geography has led to scholars dislocating and complicating canonical understandings of urban informality through the experiences of street vendors in the South (Lindell, 2019; Palat Narayanan, 2022). Thus, bringing the situatedness and the postcolonial spatiality of intersectional thought into conversation with each other can perhaps yield an approach that is more productively suited to realise the complex constitutions of street vending spaces in India.

Another key concept in my conceptual framework is that of caste. Here, I understand caste not just as a customary belief, but as a spatio-political economy with a material base that produces a structure of power (Ambedkar, 1979). The growing scholarship on anti-caste geography echoes this understanding of caste, with a significant strand bringing racial capitalism into the fold. While a full discussion is outside the scope of this paper, I find the work of geographers such as Ranganathan (2022) and Gupta (2022) noteworthy in attempting to go beyond reductive analogies between caste and race, instead focusing on the historically and spatially specific ways caste deploys race-like logics to produce racialised bodies and spaces in India.

5 | CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of the available literature on women street vendors in the Global South, and then specifically in India, this paper has shown that significant socio-spatial disparities exist between men and women vendors, with the latter often at a disadvantage; the gendering of urban space determines the production, navigation of and access to space; and gendered anxieties around vending give rise to internalised and community-based control strategies. Through this paper, I have also identified several knowledge gaps and future directions for research. First, there is a need for a feminist geography approach towards vending that draws upon multidisciplinary sources and grounds the research in the intersectional realities of vending spaces, constituted not just by vendors, but also by waged stall workers, customers, suppliers, middlemen, and so forth. Second, caste is not the only category of power operating in India, and a situated intersectional thinking could bring further attention to the spatialities of tribe, ethnicity and religion, and their colonial and postcolonial entanglements, as Ghosh (2021) has shown through her work on street vending spaces in Manipur and Kolkata.

Third, the gendering of space is not just about focusing on the experiences of ‘women’ as a category, but of interrogating gender as a material structure with diverse expressions of identity—topics such as street vending and public space usage in relation to masculinities, queer and trans identities, for example, are also equally understudied and have potential to be explored by future scholars. Fourth, we need more critical, qualitative studies on women street vendors in India in order to understand why there are fewer women plying on the streets compared with other Southern countries, the gendered barriers to public space, political power and resources, and how the production of and access to urban space plays a role. This could also help stimulate policy attention and interventions that prioritise the rights and well-being of women working in the urban informal sector.

Lastly, more conceptual work is needed at the intersection of caste, gender and space in India. As I have shown in this review, women street vendors in India occupy a unique position at this junction, and it would be remiss not to explore this avenue in order to develop insights about the intersectional production of vending spaces, and ultimately, the power relations embedded in spatial practices in India and beyond.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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