



Negotiation, Margins and Social Exclusion: Understanding the informal space in Ima Keithel (Women's Market) Manipur, India

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Abstract

Ima Keithel (Mother's Market) of Manipur, India is known to the world as a unique center and symbol of women's empowerment. This 500-year-old market has been an important meeting space and trading hub of Manipur, India. The significance of the market is that only women perform various economic activities and women are the only buyers and sellers of this particular market. Owing to social norms, men are restricted from entering the market even as buyers. Existing data shows that majority of the economically active women in developing countries are engaged in informal sector. The proposed research attempt to explore the expanding informal space with the influx of more women primarily engaged as street vendor in search of meagre income and consistent livelihood. An increasing number of street vendors around this market has been witnessed over time and there is a need for a deeper understanding of their economic vulnerability in the context of growing urbanity. This study focuses on the unique traditional ways of negotiating economic spaces by these diverse marginalized women groups with the state and policy makers. The present work will employ ethnographic method, follows intersectional feminist perspective while analyzing the prospects and challenges faced by the marginalized women in informal sector. The ethnographic data that I am going to analyze is collected from August 2021 to July 2022.

Keywords: Keithel, Women Market, Negotiation, Informal Space

Introduction

Market form an important part of economic activities for women. According to Mintz (1971) ^[2] market places a premium on intelligence and decisiveness instead of heavy manual labour, and therefore market trade trends to be dominated by women. Boserup (1970) ^[1] has demonstrated the portion of women in trade is higher than in other occupations in less developed economies. Marketing opens opportunities for women unavailable in other sectors of the economy. Women constitute an important role in the market, therefore, one cannot speak of marketing sector without thinking about women which has always been the domain of women in many counties in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Women market traders is a way of life in those countries like markets in Nairobi, Lagos and Accra, in many Southeast Asian countries and even in South Asia are dominated by women who are responsible for a massive trade in foods and clothes. With economic liberalization as there are growing signs of urbanity with more opportunities with consistent livelihoods, there has been a rural-urban migration trend and women share substantially in this trend. There is also a rising trend of informal activities in these growing urban spaces where people suffer from any kind of socio- economic security and are exposed to various vulnerabilities both from the state and society and are falling in a new trap of poverty. In this context economic informality is assumed to be an economy of the poor where people are unemployed, partially employed, casual labourers, street subsistence workers, street children and members of the underworld derive their livelihoods (Bayat 2000: 534). The International Labour Organization (ILO 1972: 5) describes the informal economy that includes petty traders, street hawkers, and other underemployed groups on the streets of big towns, including both male and female wage earners and self- employed people.

Moser (1978) defines the informal sector as the urban poor, which includes people living in the slums or squatter settlements found in the cities of developing countries.

The Ema keithel or Khwairamband keithel of Maipur, situated at the heart of the capital city Imphal is known to the world as a unique centre and symbol of women empowerment. It is one of the significant 'women markets' where only women perform various economic activities. Keithel means market in Manipuri; the word keithel is derived from kei, which means storing place where food grains are stored and Thel, which means displaying the purchasable items. According to T. C Hodson (1908), the khwairamband keithel started by the end of the year 1580. This 500-year-old market has been an important meeting space and trading hub of Manipur. The market has women traders constituting to the number of 3,800 licensed vendors. However, the number of (illegal) women street vendors far exceeds the number of permanent, while the legalized vendors which have been provided plots and licenses at the 3 main structured market sheds. Moreover, the permanent vendors belong to a particular community, the Meitei community only. While the majority of the street vendors around the market are known to belong to the weaker sections of the society. These street vendors, therefore, face all forms of insecurities that workforce from the informal sector faces, such as lack of basic social security, lack of financial securities, extreme penury, lack of institutional financial backup, no occupational safety, no legal protection and persistent harassment by the state forces like police and municipal authorities. There have been various forms of conflicts and rattles between the two categories of vendors with protests, strikes and market shut down, owing to various reasons. An increasing number of street vendors around this market is being considered by the permanent, licensed women vendors as a threat to their business and hence protests are being held by their members demanding regulations from the government, which would ensure security of their business. Imphal, being the economic nerve centre of the state, has witnessed a quantum increase in attracting this labour force overtime and there is a need for a deeper understanding of their vulnerability in the context of growing urbanity and the resisting forces from the permanent members of the market. According to Soibam (2012), Ema keithel has become a highly urbanised space in its present state offering very little space to people of other ethnic communities as well as women of the Meitei community who are not from the capital (Imphal). Women certainly do not belong to a single community who regard their primary identity affiliation to it: class, clans, ethnic and spatial location remains more a primary identity that seems not to allow the consolidation of identities. This propose research would concentrate on street vendors who are different ethnic communities/ groups such as women from the hills, Meitei Muslim women and women who are far from the capital Imphal.

Statement and objective of the research paper

In the larger context of the debate of economic informality in the growing urban spaces, Ema Market is one of the interesting sites where one notices the contradictory process of women as an agency of empowerment and the structuring of women's condition by the same agency in a hierarchical manner. And in this situation, there is a growing trend of more women from the neighbouring rural remote and hill

areas of Imphal who are joining this market system in search of livelihood opportunities but are unable to negotiate with the existing hierarchy and structure. Thus they are forced to relocate themselves around the peripheral areas of the Ema market as informal traders or street vendors without any valid licence system. This binary between the formal and informal women traders in and around the growing Ema market of the Impahl town has produced a set of challenges and demands fresh attention to understand both theoretically and empirically. The objective of the proposed study therefore is to examine whether the prevailing hierarchical structure of relations is a reproduction of relations structured by the society itself or is it a new form of relation permeated by contestation for primitive accumulation of the capitalist mode. It challenges the ontological understanding of the very notion of empowerment as well as demands one to question the nature of power dynamics that operates among the various classes and community in Manipur beyond the commercial space. It aims to understand how the growing urbanity in Impahl town is negotiating with the informal space of the women street vendors in and around Ema market in the larger political economy of the state.

Methodology

Keeping the nature of the proposed research in mind, fieldwork configured as the indispensable part of the research work. The study has identified Ema Market located in capital Imphal, as the possible sites for fieldwork. It has considered historical, cultural and the rising political economic significance of women empowerment in the Ema market, the nodal space of the current research. It will take up feminist approach to understand such complexities and binaries within the larger context of women empowerment. Sharlene Nagy (2011), define feminist research is not the methods first feminist use all kind of methods they use qualitative, quantitative, emerging and mixed methods but what's makes unique about feminist research is the perspective. Feminist perspective usually to be qualitative because tools are practised using the sensitivity of looking at the issues of power, deeply listing to the issues of women, asking question that deal with women, issues of difference women like working class women not all the women are same. Feminist approaches dealing with oppressed women and others groups, others things in social changes and social justices. the present research work will follow the feminist perspective and ethnographic account by adopting primarily a qualitative method to collect data. The researcher will engage in participant observation. Secondary sources will therefore be used from various sources to identify, classify and understand the issue in continuity. Relying on basic philosophical and methodological understanding laid out by Durkheim (Rules of Sociological Method, (1982, 2nd Edition). The research paper is conducted using a set of methodical tools and techniques. This include a detailed ethnography at the Ima Keithel area which will be conducted through in-depth interview of a set number of women vendors.

Queen of negotiation

All kind of markets and marketing opens opportunities to women unavailable in other sectors of the economy. Since, women play an important role in the market, no one can speak of market without taking women into consideration. In certain countries of Africa, Latin America and Asia women had come to dominate the market space as well as market

economy. In country such as Ghana women traders and street vendors has dominated the market economy by controlling urban food supply. Despite considerable hardships, women traders continue to play a vital role in urban food supply chain. (Fergus Lyon 2004, pp. 166). Lyon's work also focuses on the street vending and marketing of great importance to the livelihoods of urban population and it was estimated that by the end of 20th century, close to 18 percent of Ghana's population was engaged in the trading activity. (Darkwa and Ackumey 2003, Ghana Living standards Survey, 1999). In West African women dominated markets, retailing remained another important and striking aspects of the food marketing system. There were various women dominated market across the globe having similar characteristics some of them being Kumasi Central Market in Ghana, Cuzco market in Peru, Women market of Vietnam and India etc.

J. Seligmann defines Cuzco daily life as

Thousands pour through the streets, all seemingly with a destination. Others huddle on the sidewalk. If one moves along with the current and picks different currents, one gradually realizes that there are rhythms: times for setting up shop and closing down, eating, taking a siesta, gossiping with friends, working, etc. This all takes place basically outside. The number of products for sale in multiple places is staggering and almost defies belief. When I close my eyes, what I see is flows of people but not exactly chaos. These complex flows really and truly don't seem to be a "stage" in any kind of modernization process. (Field journal notes, July 1999, J. Seligmann 2004)

In the Ima Keithel women is the only one who has done both buyers and sellers. With reference to Gazetteer of Manipur 1786, all the trading activities of the country was lead by women itself in the open air and the markets were held in the morning. Where as the condition is different at present time and the slot of market opened from morning to till night. Women traders came from different distance places to trade in the marker which shows that Manipuri women is the best example of glaring the way of struggling for their existence. (Barua, I. Devi, A. 2017. p. 130) Lilly defines Manipur women markets as is formalized space due to the city Municipalities came into existence and not only Municipalities whereas Panchayati Raj and town for the villages came into existence in villages rural areas. In Manipur every district where women main markets is asserted in formal market space except street vendors however earning from economic institution are still to be formally detailed for the whole economy of the state. (Lilee, 2019. P-26) traders in Manipur women market can be generally divided into two ways, such as rented trader and owned trader through the class or caste constructed deviation. Author findings on her case studies of women's work participation in domestic and market spheres such as in the 1st category women find out selling their goods item in a rented shed and most of the vendors (52percent) of the trading women are occupying or trading on her owned sheds. Whereas whole sheds are come under the control of Municipality, women traders in multiple sheds or kinds of vendors are paying distinctive fees varying from Rs 5 each day to Rs. 300 and above monthly. When it comes to the next finding where women chose to take part in vending due to different aspects as such approximately one fourth of them chose to take part in market due to earning their livelihood

and uniform percentage of women respondents began trading items in the world of women market for pleasure of passing time by way of the principal reason. Financially weak or money crises in the respected families is the one of the most important reason where women started to take part in the small amount of market trading (Mayanglambam, L. 2019. P-26).

Finding

Most marginal group of Ima Keitel traders and in the process gain valuable insights into the nature of contesting space that characterize urban marketing. Many studies on urban marketing and commerce reveal that conflict is endemic to urban markets both in India and abroad (Sarin 1979; Lessinger op cit.). one of the most common causes of conflict in the marketplace is dispute over the use of space. As Lessinger notes in her study of women traders in Madras city: *Much of the ordinary retailers prosperity and earning ability depends on the kind of daily sales turnover possibility. This in turn depends on the acquisition and retention of a good selling location. Good sales in a hot or busy market place the ambition of every traders are possible only where large crowd of buyers will pass everyday.... Unfortunately, these are also the very areas highly prized by bourgeois property owners for essentially the same reasons. Clashes are almost inevitable* (Ibid., 319).

Although Ima Keithel 3 main structure building is planned market but more than half of the traders have no proper shed at all, and conduct their business in the lanes and staircase of the three main structure building of the marketplace. Indicative of the increasing number of women who turn to trade to earn a living women comprised about 70 percent of the pavement sellers. Needless to say, the large numbers of pavement sellers have not only worsened conditions in the already congested marketplace but also contributed to the outbreak of constant disputes over space.

Lack of space not only makes the street sellers likely to engage in disputes with fellow squatters but also increase their vulnerability to harassment by the permanent traders, who often viewed their presence as a menace and nuisance because their wares obstruct passages in the marketplace. As a result, street sellers face frequent harassment at the hands of market officials, who in their attempt to keep the passages clear for shoppers, often use force to dislodge them from their location. In such operations, sellers are often pack their goods and move to less crowded parts of the market where they are less likely to be an obstruction. Such destructions have an adverse effect on the earnings of street sellers owing to the damage caused to the goods in the course of transfer and loss of their regular customers. Hence, once they gain possession of a suitable location, sellers make every effort to stick to it. (Interview conducted on November 18, 2021)

The poor socio-economic conditions of street traders make them vulnerable to the lure of political protest and propaganda. With frequent bandhs (Closures) and Hartals (strikes) called by the non-state actors, student organisation and political activists of various political hues, the adversely affected are the small scale retailers and pavement sellers. These closures mean greater headship for the poor, who have practically no savings set aside for emergencies. The political turbulence and instability has also considerably undermined the social character of the market. First, the increasing violence has made the market a security risk, no longer a safe place where women can work peacefully from the early hours

of the morning until late in the evening. (Interview conducted on November 27, 2021)

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