Chapter 7
Street Vending:
A Case of Economic Adaptation of the “Paanwalas” in Indian Cities

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this chapter is on the ingenious transformation of the Indian betel leaf vendor (paanwala)’s business. The “paanwala” who used to concentrate on the sale of betel leaf (paan) only has begun to engage in a diversified street vending. In fact, the sale of the “paan” itself has now been relegated to the background in favor of more modern and sophisticated items. This chapter reports on a study conducted among 174 betel leaf sellers in Pune. The findings of the study revealed that 80% of the sellers were aged between 18 and 45 years. They have diversified the items in their boxes to include tobacco products and other modern confectioneries. Although the “paanwalas” stated that they were making fairly good livelihood out of their work, they continue to face such difficulties as harassment from local authorities and denial of right of ownership of property. It is recommended that a partnership between the “paanwalas” and the companies would assist in promoting innovation among the paanwalas.

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INTRODUCTION

The urban informal sector is more visible. In most cities of the world, the urban poor survive by working in the informal sector. Poverty and unemployment in the villages and smaller towns drive a large populace to cities in search of work and livelihood. Poor skills and low level of education deny them the opportunity for better-paid jobs in the organized sector. This has led to rapid growth of the urban informal sector. The informal sector is seen to support the migrant population, often coming to cities in search of employment or livelihood opportunities.

Work in the informal sector is the only means of survival for the urban poor around the world. Self-employed enterprises are mostly put together with little financial capital and technology along with indigenous resources and family involvement. Street vending is one example one such venture that attempts to supply livelihood for survival. Street vending is known for ease of entry and it equally requires only limited capital. For these reasons, new migrants to cities seek after it in large numbers for immediate sustenance. Out of the existing many street vending activities in Indian cities, there is the betel leaves vending. The vendor of these leaves is traditionally known as the ‘paanwala’ (pa:nwallah). This vendor who has been known to holding on to the sale of betel leaves for decades, is currently diversifying his business under the pressure of city life.

This chapter examines the manner in which the ‘paanwala’ has evolved and innovated his business in recent times.

BACKGROUND

Traditionally, India is a consumer of the betel leaf or the ‘paan’. However, betel leaves chewing is not particular to only India but also to many Eastern countries. Betel leaf chewing is a part of the culture of such countries as Burma, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, the Pacific Islands, the Marquesas, China, Indo-China, Siam, East Africa, Arabia and Persia to name but a few. The consumption of ‘paan’ can be seen as a matter of habit, a convention, a part of hospitality or just an after-meal accompaniment ‘breath-sweetening technique’. In birth and death, in joy and sorrow, in respect and contempt, in friendship and enmity and in challenge as well as in honor, the indispensable nature of betel leaf is ever highlighted in all actions taken in the countries mentioned earlier.
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