



## A Vignette of Kolkata: People Who Make It Easy to Buy - Jharna Chatterjee

It's an interesting, busy and wonderful world! I am talking about the streets of Kolkata where a wide range of articles necessary for day-to-day life are sold everyday on the streets, right near your home. In recent months, I used to wake up every morning, listening to a hawker call loudly "Want vegetables? Fresh veggies! Brother, do you want some veggies?" (Literally, in Bengali, he would say "Sobji chai, sobji? Sobji chai, Dada, sobji chai?") He would come close to the window or balcony of a prospective buyer, wait there for a few minutes and call again until there is a response, preferably affirmative. If we decided to buy some vegetables, we could then lower a grocery bag tied to a strong string and lower it to the vendor. He would weigh the selected vegetables and put them in the bag for us to pull it up. A payment would be made the same way, by using the bag. On various occasions, I had an opportunity to take photos from this first-floor balcony and watch the transactions. They were faster walkers than me, so there was no point in my trying to go downstairs to take photos.

These people usually carry their merchandise on a few baskets mounted on the back of their bike. Those who sell fewer or lighter objects would simply carry them in their hands and walk from one street to another. They would address prospective buyers as "Older brother (Dada), older sister (Didi), sister-in-law (Boudi) or mother (Ma) – as is the custom in India for showing proper respect to unrelated adults, and often, it goes both ways.



Left: A vegetable vendor looking up at us expectantly; Right: A hawker selling dusters

On most days, the next vendor would be a fish-seller carrying a variety of fish in bags or baskets securely placed on his bike, loudly calling "Mother, do you need some fish? I have big Rui, Katla, fresh Bata, Parshe, Pabda, Tangra, Topshe and shrimp!" It would be the same process for buying fish – using the grocery bag for "taking and giving". The fish-seller would often scale, clean (gut) and if necessary, slice (into steaks) the fish for cooking with no extra charge for doing that service.



Left: A fish-seller getting ready to weigh fish using an old-fashioned scale; Right: preparing the fish for cooking – using a floor-level knife mounted on a piece of narrow, rectangular wood, while the buyers look on and supervise.

Later in the day when the sun is in mid-sky, some vendor might come there offering you a glass of fresh sugarcane-juice, squeezed out then and there for you to drink. There are others, such as the man who twangs on the gadget he uses to shred and lighten the cotton for making light and cozy comforters. This distinctive sound effectively eliminates the need for loud calling to advertise his services.



Left: Selling freshly squeezed sugarcane juice – the sugar canes are held in his left hand, the squeezing handle in his right; Right: A comforter-maker – notice the simple gadget – a wooden frame with a string – attached to the front of his bike, and the bag containing cotton at the back.

There is also the man who calls about home-makers' possible need to sharpen scissors and knives; there is the man who would mend your flat stone-slab and oblong pestle for grinding spices; there is the man who would buy all used newspapers and used writing papers from you; also the man who would exchange old mosquito nets for new ones, and the one who would exchange old utensils for new ones – in a simple way of recycling. Come to think of it, I have not seen any woman street-vendors. Late on summer nights many years ago, there used to be a man advertising ice (for alcoholic drinks?) and fragrant garlands (for romance-seeker Casanovas, I think!) I am not sure the former happens any longer, with refrigerators in almost all homes now-a-days. Some of these "calls" are difficult to decipher, especially for novices – but the experienced residents of Kolkata know which is which.



A vegetable-seller on a suburban street – in a make-shift evening market; the vibrantly colored fresh vegetables are usually picked up the same morning from local farms.

Strictly speaking, the next two photographs were not taken on the streets of Kolkata. They were taken on or near a train. The first one is of a person dressed like a "baul", a traveling mendicant or a holy man in his saffron attire, singing a song to the accompaniment of a one-string instrument. The round part of the instrument aroused my suspicion, so I asked what it was made of. Very proudly, he replied that it was a wok, held to the rest of the instrument with

some clamps. He added, "During the day, it serves as a musical instrument, and at night I can take it off and use it to cook my food." You can't help but admire his ingenuity!



The "baul" on a train – entertaining for small cash donations

The last photo is that of a man selling fresh cucumbers to train passengers at a railway station. We were sitting in the train, waiting for it to leave the station in half an hour or so. Suddenly, I heard a young lady call out from our compartment, "O Shosha-kaku (cucumber-uncle)! Do you have any tender cucumbers?" This novel way of addressing a cucumber-seller made me jump up and take a photo of the "Shosha-kaku", who was busy peeling a tender cucumber for another customer standing on the platform.



"Shosha-kaku" peeling a cucumber

This incident reminded me of a rather witty cucumber-vendor who, in a very serious tone, would approach and ask a prospective customer: "Dada, would you like me to skin and put salt [on a cucumber]?" What was left out but understood were the words in parentheses, but the way the question was posed for humor could mean "Would you like me to skin [you] and then put salt [on your body]?" Humor is often used and appreciated by all participants as well as observers in such situations. Another story goes like this: "For only ten rupees you will be able to sit and eat for life" (meaning you would never have to work again for a livelihood). What was he selling? It was a low, wide, wooden seat that was widely used by people all over India to sit upon while eating their meals, even fifty to sixty years ago – until the Western habit of using tables and chairs took over the urban, middle-class people.

Kolkata is an interesting city, no doubt. Some believe it is also a hypnotic city. However, like any big city, it has its problems: overwhelmed with over-crowding – exacerbated thousand times because of its still ever-increasing population and their needs for accommodation, transportation, education, employment and health care. Yet, zest for life is only a step away, if you know where to look.

Note: All photos in this article were taken by the author