

**RESEARCH PAPER****Social Characteristics and Livelihood Patterns of Shopkeepers in Bodh Gaya****Ahmad Eqbal**

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Email: dr.ahmadeqbal2018@gmail.comReceived: 25th April 2021, Revised: 27th May 2021, Accepted: 30th May 2021, Published: 30th June 2021**ABSTRACT**

Informal shopkeepers constitute a vital segment of urban economies by providing affordable goods and services to the general public, particularly in developing nations like India. Despite their extensive contribution to local commerce, they remain outside the formal economic framework, facing economic insecurity, lack of institutional support, and social marginalization. This study investigates the socio-economic conditions of informal shopkeepers in Bodh Gaya, Gaya district (Bihar), where a significant portion of the urban poor and migrant population depend on informal shopkeeping for livelihood. Based on empirical field research involving 110 shopkeepers around the Mahabodhi Temple, the research employs descriptive analysis to examine demographic profiles, occupational patterns, income levels, and working conditions. The findings reveal that most shopkeepers belong to economically disadvantaged and rural migrant groups with low educational attainment, minimal assets, and unstable incomes. Women constitute a small proportion of shopkeepers, largely driven to participate by financial necessity. The study highlights limited access to housing, credit, and legal protection, coupled with harassment by local authorities. The paper underscores the need for effective implementation of The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, along with policy reforms that enhance the social security, working conditions, and economic stability of informal shopkeepers in Bodh Gaya.

Keywords: *Informal economy, street vending, shopkeepers, Bodh Gaya, socio-economic conditions, urban poverty, migrant livelihoods, Bihar, informal sector, livelihood security*

INTRODUCTION

Shopkeepers are a global phenomenon and form an essential component of urban economies, representing the most visible segment of the informal economic sector. They provide convenient access to a wide range of goods and services for the general public. The practice of informal shopkeeping has existed since ancient times in India as well as in many parts of the world. Despite their significant contribution to urban economic activities, these shopkeepers remain a part of the informal sector and are often associated with low levels of income.

Across the world, millions of shopkeepers earn their livelihood by selling diverse goods in public spaces. Informal shopkeeping plays a crucial role in generating employment among the urban poor, thereby contributing to production and income generation. These shopkeepers generally operate without any permanent structure or established shop. They remain mobile, carrying their goods on handcarts, bicycles, or even baskets on their heads, and become stationary only when they temporarily occupy public pavements. Thus, shopkeepers include both mobile and stationary informal sellers.

Most of these shopkeepers belong to socio-economically disadvantaged groups who are unable to secure employment in the formal sector. Informal shopkeeping attracts large numbers of people because it requires limited skills, allows self-employment, and can be started with minimal financial investment. Using their meagre resources, these shopkeepers start their work and manage their livelihood needs.

Shopkeepers ensure easy availability of daily-use items such as fruits, vegetables, milk, newspapers, and other essentials. Without them, there would be a severe shortage of basic goods and services, especially perishable products like fruits, vegetables, and dairy items. Since the government cannot provide formal employment to all, informal shopkeeping becomes a viable source of livelihood for the unskilled as well as for many skilled individuals who lack opportunities.

In cities of Bihar, including Gaya, a large segment of the poor population depends on informal shopkeeping for survival. Migrants from rural areas move to cities or small towns due to the lack of employment opportunities-in both formal and informal sectors. These migrants generally possess low or no skills, and even those with basic education often fail to secure better-paid formal jobs. Moreover, permanent employment in states like Bihar, particularly in districts such as Gaya, is limited due to the absence of manufacturing industries.

Consequently, many rural migrants find themselves involved in hawking or informal shopkeeping, as this activity requires very low investment, minimal skills, and has no significant barriers to entry. In Gaya and its Nagar Panchayat, Bodh Gaya, economically weaker sections from surrounding villages purchase goods according to their limited financial capacity. They rely heavily on these informal shopkeepers because the goods they sell are generally affordable. Thus, a major portion of the population of Gaya and Bodh Gaya depends on informal shopkeepers for meeting daily needs. Any removal of these shopkeepers from local markets could lead to a serious crisis, particularly for poor households relying on low-cost goods.

With rapid urbanization, informal shopkeeping in Bodh Gaya-especially around the Mahabodhi Temple-has increasingly been viewed as a challenge to planned development. In 2016, shopkeepers in Bodh Gaya demanded implementation of *The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014*, seeking identity cards, licenses, and access to bank loans. Due to Bodh Gaya's growing global prominence as a pilgrimage and tourism destination, the Indian government in 2007 deployed police and military personnel to assist in demolishing long-standing businesses and houses under the area's master plan. Shopkeepers alleged they were removed from around the Mahabodhi Temple without being provided alternative locations. However, the Nagar Panchayat authorities later identified a designated shopkeeper zone and relocated them accordingly.

PROBLEMS FACED BY SHOPKEEPERS

Informal shopkeepers constitute a highly vulnerable segment of the urban economy and therefore encounter numerous challenges. Despite their significant role in the marketplace of Bodh Gaya, the commercial space allocated to them remains extremely limited (see related tables and maps). These shopkeepers routinely experience harassment from local authorities, including both municipal and traffic police. The growing number of shopkeepers in Bodh Gaya has also contributed to congestion and related difficulties in areas surrounding the Mahabodhi Temple.

Informal shopkeepers fall outside the protection of existing labour laws and are not represented by labour unions. As a result, they lack institutional safeguards and remain exposed to exploitation. Fluctuating market prices, competition for limited selling space, and unstable income further intensify their economic insecurity. Despite working long hours, their daily earnings remain low, and many report paying 10 to 20 percent of their income as bribes to avoid continued harassment from local officials.

Since their activities are concentrated in public spaces, the presence of shopkeepers is often associated with traffic obstruction, waste disposal issues, and concerns related to hygiene. Nevertheless, a large proportion of uneducated and low-skilled individuals continue to depend on informal shopkeeping for their survival, given the absence of alternative livelihood options.

In recent years, the rise of online shopping platforms has also affected these shopkeepers by enabling direct transactions between consumers and suppliers, often resulting in lower prices and reduced demand for locally sold goods. Overall, informal shopkeepers operate without meaningful government support, and their contributions to the socio-economic landscape of urban centers have historically been overlooked. Although the government enacted a bill for the protection and regulation of such workers in 2013, implementation challenges remain significant.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The present study seeks to examine the socio-economic conditions of informal shopkeepers in Bodh Gaya (Gaya district). The specific objectives of the research are as follows (as supported by relevant tables and maps):

- To analyse the demographic characteristics of the shopkeepers.

- To examine the major problems faced by shopkeepers.
- To study the social conditions of shopkeepers in the area.
- To explore the types of shopkeeping practices.
- To propose policy measures aimed at improving the social status of shopkeepers.
- To identify the key constraints and challenges encountered by shopkeepers.

METHODOLOGY

The present study investigates the socio-economic conditions of informal shopkeepers in Bodh Gaya (Gaya district) and is primarily based on field research. To develop a comprehensive understanding of their conditions, the study adopts a descriptive yet empirical approach. The descriptive component outlines the characteristics of the shopkeepers who participated in the field-based empirical investigation.

A convenience sampling technique was employed to select a sample of 110 shopkeepers operating in the vicinity of the Mahabodhi Temple. Efforts were made to include diverse categories of shopkeepers dealing in food items, vegetables, fruits, and various daily-use products (as reflected in corresponding tables and maps).

Primary data were collected through direct interaction with shopkeepers using structured and semi-structured questionnaires, group discussions, and informal interviews. Questions covered multiple aspects of shopkeeping and socio-economic conditions. Surveyors recorded responses themselves, with special attention given to illiterate shopkeepers. The collected data were compiled, tabulated, and converted into percentages for clarity, as the analysis did not require advanced statistical techniques.

LIMITATIONS IN DATA COLLECTION

- Respondents often hesitated to disclose information related to income and assets.
- Many were unsure about the exact amount of investment made in different aspects of their business.

STUDY AREA

Gaya district is bordered by Arwal, Jehanabad, and Nalanda districts to the north; Nawada to the east; Palamu, Chatra, and Hazaribag districts of Jharkhand to the south; and Aurangabad to the west. The geographical coordinates of Gaya are 24° 47' 48.70" N latitude and 85° 00' 13.86" E longitude. Gaya is one of the holiest pilgrimage destinations for both Hindus and Buddhists, with a constant inflow of visitors throughout the year.

Bodh Gaya-located approximately 11 km south of Gaya town-is the sacred site where Lord Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree more than 2,500 years ago. The tree, situated within the Mahabodhi Temple complex, is considered the spiritual center of the Buddhist world. In 2002, the Mahabodhi Temple was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Bodh Gaya is well connected to surrounding regions through state highways and NH-83, which links major cities such as Delhi, Kolkata, Patna, and Varanasi. Situated on the western bank of the Niranjana (Phalgu) River, it lies at an elevation of 113 meters above mean sea level. Administratively, Bodh Gaya is a Nagar Panchayat spread across 19.60 sq. km. and had a population of 38,439 in 2011. Of this population, 19,908 were males and 18,531 were females, resulting in a sex ratio of 931 females per 1,000 males-13 points higher than the Bihar state average of 918.

According to the 2011 Census, the literacy rate of Bodh Gaya stands at 70.04 percent, 8.24 percentage points above the state average of 61.80 percent. Male literacy is 78.13 percent, while female literacy is 61.29 percent. The population density is 2,647 persons per sq. km., significantly higher than the state average of 1,021 persons per sq. km.

As a major international pilgrimage destination, Bodh Gaya attracts Buddhist pilgrims from around the world, many of whom stay for extended periods ranging from several weeks to months. Informal shopkeeping around such sacred sites plays a crucial role in meeting the daily needs of economically weaker pilgrims as well as local residents and rural visitors (details shown in related tables and maps).

GENDER COMPOSITION AND PARTICIPATION IN SHOPKEEPING

In Bodh Gaya, shopkeeping is predominantly undertaken by men. This may be attributed to their responsibility to financially support their families. In contrast, fewer women participate in shopkeeping, possibly due to discomfort in working within crowded markets dominated by men and concerns regarding safety. Additional factors-such as harassment by police or male shopkeepers and the absence of basic amenities like public toilets-also contribute to the lower participation of women.

Most of the women who do engage in shopkeeping do so out of necessity. Approximately 13.64 percent of the total shopkeepers are women compelled to work due to the absence of an earning family member. Another 3.64 percent (four women) reported joining shopkeeping due to the death of their parents. Among the 21 female shopkeepers, only one entered the activity due to lack of skill, and one due to limited financial investment capacity. Women generally operate during daytime and typically work fewer than eight hours per day.

AGE STRUCTURE OF SHOPKEEPERS

The highest proportion of shopkeepers-both male and female-belong to the 26-30 age group, which suggests that many are still capable of seeking employment in formal sectors. Of the total respondents, 19.09 percent are males and 4.55 percent females in this age category.

A total of 18 shopkeepers fall within the 31-35 age group, including 3 women (2.73 percent of all shopkeepers). The 36-40 age group comprises 15 shopkeepers (13.64 percent), of which 4 are female (3.64 percent).

Only seven shopkeepers were below 15 years of age, and none were female. Similarly, only four respondents were aged 50 and above, all of whom were male; however, one woman belonged to the 46-50 age group. Overall, the data show a gradual decline in the number of shopkeepers in higher age groups across both genders.

EDUCATIONAL PROFILE OF SHOPKEEPERS

Salesmanship is closely linked to communication skills, which improve with education. However, gender-wise analysis of educational levels shows that the shopkeepers of Bodh Gaya generally have low educational attainment.

Among 110 respondents, 26 were illiterate, including 15 women (13.64 percent of all shopkeepers). Another 42 shopkeepers had studied up to the 6th standard, among whom 3 were females. Thus, out of 21 female shopkeepers, 15 were illiterate and only 3 had education up to class 6, reflecting significantly lower educational attainment compared to men-likely a consequence of severe socio-economic hardship.

Notable findings include:

- 34 respondents (30.91 percent) had education up to the 10th standard, with only 2 females.
- 6 shopkeepers had qualified up to the 12th standard, including one woman.
- Remarkably, one respondent had completed graduation and another post-graduation, highlighting the scarcity of suitable employment opportunities even for educated individuals in Bihar.

Most shopkeepers reported migrating from nearby rural areas in search of employment but entered shopkeeping due to lack of education, limited skills, and restricted job options. Low household income and the death of earning members further contributed to poor educational status.

MARITAL STATUS

Survey indicates that 64.55 percent of the shopkeepers are married. Among the 71 married respondents, 11 are women (10 percent of the total). Many of these women appear to have entered shopkeeping due to poor economic conditions within their families.

About 22 shopkeepers (20 percent) were unmarried, including only two women. There were 11 widows/widowers, of whom 6 were widows (5.45 percent), and out of six divorced respondents, two were divorced women.

REASONS FOR CHOOSING SHOPKEEPING

Multiple factors influence why individuals take up shopkeeping in Bodh Gaya and across Bihar. The most common reason is the inability to secure employment in the formal sector due to low education, lack of skills, poverty, and lack of capital. Shopkeeping offers an accessible livelihood option with no formal entry barriers and requires minimal investment.

AMONG THE 110 RESPONDENTS

- 28 shopkeepers (25.45 percent) cited lack of skill as their reason for choosing this occupation; only one woman belonged to this category.
- 21 male shopkeepers entered the activity due to unemployment.
- 15 out of 21 female shopkeepers engaged in shopkeeping due to the absence of an earning family member (13.64 percent of all respondents).
- 12 shopkeepers (10.91 percent) chose the activity because it required low investment.

Given that nearly one-fourth of the respondents were illiterate, shopkeeping emerged as the most feasible livelihood option available to them.

HOUSING CONDITIONS

Housing remains a major challenge for shopkeepers in Bodh Gaya. Out of 110 respondents, only 36 (32.73 percent) owned a house. Among these, 13 were women who did not live in rented accommodation.

Rental housing plays a critical role for most shopkeeping families, particularly migrants from rural areas. A total of 74 respondents lived in rented one- or two-room units-often the only affordable option near their place of work due to their limited income.

FAMILY SIZE

Family size directly affects household expenditure and income needs. None of the shopkeepers were childless. The largest group consisted of those with three children (35 respondents, or 31.82 percent), including nine women (8.18 percent). Another 21 respondents (19.09 percent) had four children, while 22 shopkeepers (20 percent) had two children, including 5 women.

FAMILY TYPE

Joint families offer emotional and financial support, and promote a sense of security-especially valuable for individuals facing economic hardship. Although nuclear families are increasingly common, around one-fourth of the shopkeepers lived in joint families. Among 21 female respondents, 15 belonged to joint families, likely due to sociocultural norms and safety considerations.

RATION CARD STATUS

Ration cards are essential for poor households, enabling them to access subsidized food grains, sugar, and kerosene, and serving as identity documents for welfare schemes.

Among 110 respondents:

- 98 shopkeepers possessed ration cards (89.09 percent).
- All 18 female card-holders belonged to BPL households.
- Out of the 98 card-holders, 96 were from BPL categories.

ADDICTION AND SUBSTANCE USE

Substance use-including alcohol, gutkha, cigarettes, beedi, and khaini-is widespread among shopkeepers in Bodh Gaya. These addictive substances are often used as coping mechanisms for stress and hardship, despite their harmful effects.

Among 110 respondents:

- 16.36 percent consumed alcohol.
- Almost all male shopkeepers used beedi, cigarettes, gutkha, or khaini.
- Among 21 female shopkeepers, 4 consumed cigarettes or beedi, while 6 used gutkha or khaini.

CONCLUSION

The study of informal shopkeepers in Bodh Gaya reveals their critical role in supporting urban livelihoods, particularly for rural migrants and economically vulnerable populations. These shopkeepers provide essential goods and services at affordable prices, ensuring food security and meeting the daily needs of local residents and pilgrims alike. Despite their significant economic contributions, they operate within precarious conditions marked by low incomes, lack of legal protection, limited access to housing, and frequent harassment by authorities. The predominance of men in this sector, along with the socio-economic marginalization of women shopkeepers, highlights ongoing gender disparities.

The findings underscore the urgent need for enhanced policy measures that not only protect the rights of informal shopkeepers but also facilitate their integration into urban economic planning. Effective implementation of The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, coupled with the provision of designated vending zones, access to credit, and social security benefits, could substantially improve their working conditions and income stability. Furthermore, efforts to address educational and skill deficiencies among shopkeepers, alongside community-based support systems, would strengthen their livelihoods.

In rapidly urbanizing pilgrimage towns like Bodh Gaya, balancing heritage conservation and inclusive urban development requires recognizing informal shopkeepers as valuable stakeholders. Sustainable development efforts must integrate their needs to avoid unintended socio-economic disruption and preserve the livelihoods of marginalized groups. This study advocates for multi-stakeholder engagement involving government agencies, civil society, and the shopkeepers themselves to foster equitable urban spaces where informal economies can thrive alongside formal growth.

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