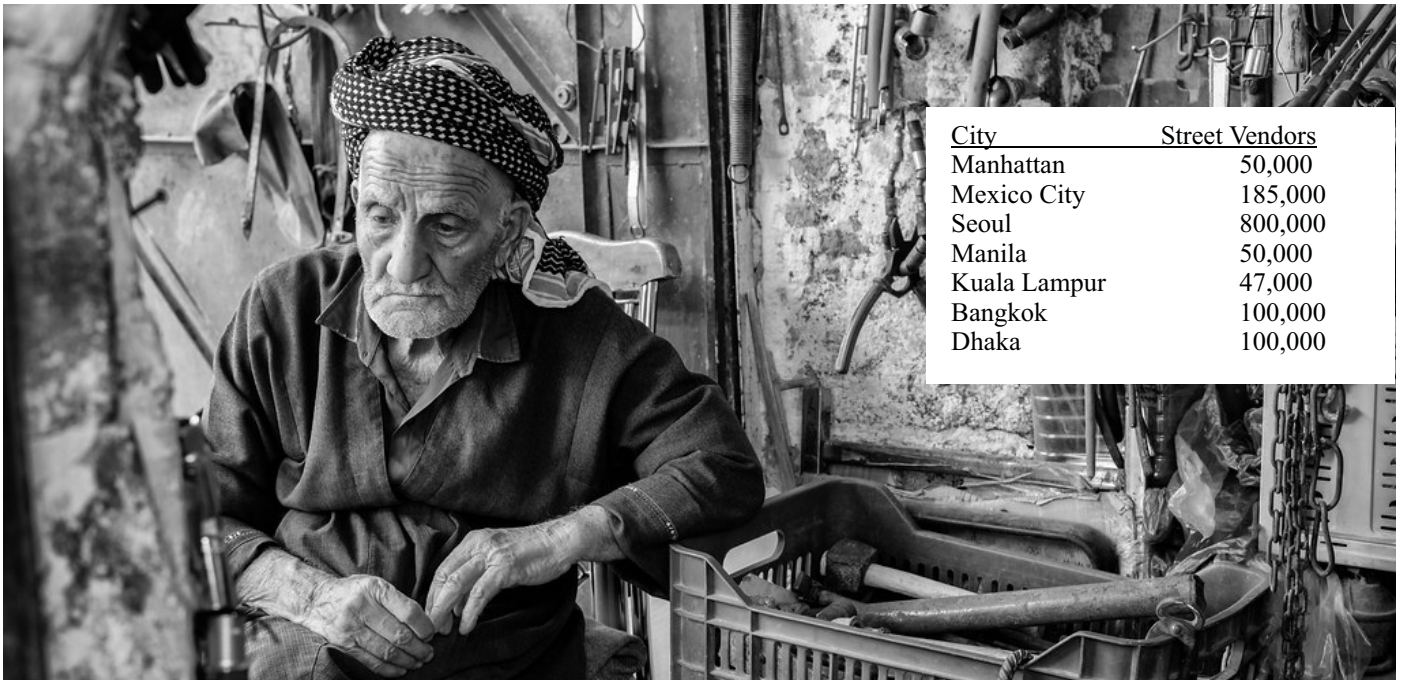


Why Not **KHOKHAS** Everywhere?

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Street-vending in kiosks (*khokhas* or *dhabas*) or mobile vendors (*chabri wallahs*) on trucks, bicycles or motor cycles are all legitimate activities which allow the poor opportunities to earn a living. History is replete with examples of such enterprises. With a small investment, anyone can be self-employed, whether serving cut fruit from a cart, or sharpening knives cycling door to door. There was a time when we would see these vendors all over Pakistani cities selling all manner of things. I remember a guy selling the most awesome wire puzzles that I wish I had kept, or the guy on a bicycle who used to be the only supplier of used Marvel comics and science fiction books.





City	Street Vendors
Manhattan	50,000
Mexico City	185,000
Seoul	800,000
Manila	50,000
Kuala Lumpur	47,000
Bangkok	100,000
Dhaka	100,000

▶ As teenagers, we used to walk or bike to local *khokhas* to pick up all manner of goods, as they were conveniently located and often cheaper than bigger stores. They were also willing to give you one cigarette from a pack or one biscuit from a pack as opposed to buying a whole packet.

Time stands still for no one, so, somewhere in the 80's the suburban DHA model arrived in Pakistan. Roads were widened to make way for cars and many of my favorite *khokhas* disappeared. I wondered where the owners had gone until one day I found one of the vendors in dire straits, being forced to beg on the streets.

Later, our pristine suburban neighborhoods became very exclusive and the mobile vendors seen everywhere, were diligently stopped by the police as well as private security. Various hawkers, the *churum* guy (a spicy paste or powder), the 'baby sweets' or 'baby chips' guy selling homemade candy and chips, the *kulfi* guy, all disappeared. I wonder where they are now. Begging for a living most probably.

Meanwhile, bureaucrats who ran cities became increasingly wedded to the American Suburban model with endless single-family homes and broad avenues for cars. Of course, they made sure to keep prime areas for their government owned housing and government-subsidized leisure clubs, as well as plots for themselves. The poor did not fit into this scheme. The masters of the city with their perks and plots therefore got even more strict with the street vendors. Police were told to vigorously eradicate all forms of poverty - poor housing and street vendors - from the line of sight of speeding cars.

Occasionally a street vendor shows up on a side street but in a matter of hours you will find some policemen throwing him out. YouTube has videos of police officers in Karachi upsetting carts of street vendors and destroying their inventory.

DHA, the pinnacle of good estate management, will not allow any street

Meanwhile, some of us in policy circles began to measure poverty and discuss poverty alleviation programs. Donors forced us to initiate many such projects. We have BISP where we are giving the poor conditional and unconditional cash transfers. We have skill development agencies in every province, and at the federal level. Several large microcredit finance agencies, and several banks that these agencies finance, are part of the mix.

So, what is it that people do with the few thousand rupees that these programs give them? There are no studies to answer this question. Mostly people ad lib: "they start their own business." And most frequently, the business is thought to be a sewing machine. One wonders how many sewing machine businesses can the poor run?

So, the next question is: "where can they set up this business?" Here the consultants have no answer. Weakly they say "at home?" But poor homes are small with large families living in them. Do they have the space to operate a business in there? Besides, would their clientele be in the neighborhood? Or will they spend time peddling their wares elsewhere? And how, when no such activity is allowed? I have personally pushed for the liberalization of street vending businesses for the last 15 years. I have presented this proposal to prime ministers and chief ministers. They like the idea until the bureaucrats shoot it down. "Why?" you would ask. I can think of no reason other than power and hubris. Unlike Pakistan, the rest of the world has a huge number of street vendors in their cities. Scanning some recent research on the subject, I found a few estimates of the number of street vendors in some major cities in the world. A few iconic

examples of street vendors are the famous food trucks in New York City and Los Angeles, the Hawker Centers in Singapore, and Night Markets in Taipei.

Street vending is a legitimate entrepreneurial activity for the poor. It also adds to city life as many of us have felt when we go to Manhattan, London, Singapore or Bangkok. It adds vitality and vibrancy to the community, promoting mingling opportunities among the most diverse segments of the society. It also extends the range of goods available and promotes price competition that serves the community with both more goods and services at lower prices. It also promotes street safety as it puts more 'eyes on the street'.

Many well-known entrepreneurs took their first steps as street vendors and grew large businesses. Vienna Beef is a large company that makes hot dogs, sausages and other food items started out as a street vending company. A heartwarming story from India is making the rounds about a blind man, Bavesh Bhatia, who has developed a multi-million dollar business starting as a street vendor.

Is it not time that we allowed street vendors in our cities? Every street and street corner should be allowed to have a street vendor. Cars must be made to give space to the poor. And there is no reason to associate street vending with poor sanitation and aesthetics. A carefully thought out policy can be put in place to develop street vending cleanly and aesthetically.

I find it strange that there are street vendors within a stone's throw of the White house, the Congress and Washington DC landmarks, and none on Constitution Avenue Islamabad. If hawkers hang out near Buckingham Palace and the Parliament, why can't there be *khokhas* next to the Governor's House, Gymkhana, Punjab Club and the Corps Commander house in Lahore?

So, let us not give the poor mere handouts without the space to grow. Street vending is a legitimate right of the poor to claim their share of entrepreneurship. Accept it and allow them to grow.