

Beggar Bosses on the Streets of Dhaka

David Jackman

To cite this article: David Jackman (2024) Beggar Bosses on the Streets of Dhaka, Journal of Contemporary Asia, 54:1, 152-169, DOI: [10.1080/00472336.2022.2135580](https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2022.2135580)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2022.2135580>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 03 Nov 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2540



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Beggar Bosses on the Streets of Dhaka

David Jackman 

Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

ABSTRACT

Public characterisations of begging tend in two directions: destitution or fraud. On the one hand begging is portrayed as largely disorganised, and on the other, criminally organised. Based on rare ethnographic research with people who beg and live on a pavement in Dhaka, Bangladesh, this article confronts such understandings, arguing that those who beg often conceive of the act as work, and relationships in such context can mirror those found among labour. Here beggars employ assistants, and associations emerge from beggars themselves, playing diverse roles, including the provision of savings and credit. While such hierarchies are largely neglected in the literature, sparse historical cases, particularly from Asia, suggest similar arrangements may be more common than recognised. This article thus builds towards a broader agenda concerning the hierarchies and associational lives of people who beg.

KEY WORDS

associations; Bangladesh; begging; crime; labour; savings and credit

The pavement outside the Supreme Court in Dhaka is by day a bustling thoroughfare, busy with barristers making their way to chambers and students passing by as they head to class. By late evening however, when traffic has calmed, hundreds of people settle down here to sleep, representing one of, if not the largest, concentration of beggars living together anywhere in the city. The background to their pavement is the imposing gate and railings of the court grounds, adjacent to a *mazar* (Islamic shrine) and overlooking a large field where prayers are held under tight security during Eid-ul-Fitr. Other people sleep across the road, next to plant and flower shops, with tarpaulins draped from the railings of the grand British era Curzon Hall, which pays homage to the city's Mughal heritage and now houses Dhaka University's Faculty of Science. Not all here beg, and some work as labourers, decorators, construction workers, and caterers for local events. Some are rickshaw drivers, and some run the businesses which keep the court and university ticking through the day, such as the tea stands and cigarette sellers. Many here, however, earn through begging.

Begging is portrayed in public discourse in starkly different ways. On the one hand people who beg in Bangladesh and beyond are seen as the destitute, desperately surviving on the streets. The act of begging often conforms to this idea and is the basis for the

CONTACT David Jackman  david.jackman@qeh.ox.ac.uk  Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford, Queen Elizabeth House, 3 Mansfield Road, Oxford OX1 3TB, UK.

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

moral claims made when asking for alms. On the other hand, people who beg are seen in public imagination as a veneer for an illicit world in which the vulnerable are exploited and great profits are made by criminal organisations (see, for example, Salgado 1977; Dean 1999; Devlieger 2018). Implicit within such characterisations, then, are the notions that begging is either largely disorganised or highly organised in a particularly criminal manner. Yet the actual social organisation and hierarchies among people who beg are the subject of few studies, and *in situ* people who beg are mostly deemed worthy of small notes or coins, but not of serious conversation or analysis. The first argument developed in this article, then, is that beggar hierarchies have been too often neglected. There are important exceptions to this in the settings of 18th and 19th century Japan (Ehlers 2011, 2019), 19th and early 20th century China (Lu 2005), and 1970s Taiwan (Schak 1988). However, there is no acknowledgement in the literature that the hierarchies studied have existed more widely, no attempts to bring such cases together, and no sense of whether they continue today. This article attempts to address these lacunae. By drawing together disparate studies and references it is argued that there is evidence for shared and widespread forms of organisation among beggars. A common form these took historically was as guilds and from the 19th century onwards there is evidence of mutual aid associations. The case developed here from Dhaka city suggests that in certain contexts similar forms of collective organisation can continue today.

The second argument developed in this article concerns the conceptualisation of these hierarchies. Rather than view these principally through the lens of organised crime and appeal to images of petty mafia, as is common, it is argued that we can also view these (perhaps counterintuitively) through the prism of work. In Dhaka there are employment relations and beggar associations, albeit under conditions that can be exploitative and exist beyond the boundaries of the law. People who beg with disabilities and live on this pavement routinely employ assistants, often children, who they pay on a daily or monthly basis. They are also organised collectively, with a history of associations intended to unite and mobilise people who beg in the area. A looser association exists today (termed a *samiti*), which primarily serves to collect savings and offer credit. This provides a form of mutual assistance to the community of beggars in the area, although to its detractors serves to enrich its leader, an older, and almost quadriplegic long-standing beggar in the area, anonymised here as Anwar. These arguments thus build on recent literature, including work by Devlieger (2018) and Lenhard (2021) which has argued that people who beg often see it as a form of work, to explore *how* such activities are organised hierarchically.

These arguments draw from ethnographic research conducted in Dhaka between 2014 and 2015. The research examined intermediation among labourers and other groups of the urban poor, studying a bazaar, a park, and a stretch of pavement adjacent to the Supreme Court, which is the focus of this article (see also Jackman 2017, 2019a, 2019b). This context was accessed initially through the work of a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) that runs a “pavement dweller centre,” with whom the author had worked in a previous professional capacity. This centre primarily helps women and children living in this and other nearby areas. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted here with a range of adult male and female participants. Aside from three NGO staff members, all lived or had previously stayed on this stretch of pavement. Eight were either currently or previously begging in the area, and others were engaged in day labour, scavenging, or small businesses. Beyond this, research took the form of participant observation in the late evening and night, when onlookers were fewer and conversation easier to build. Over approximately 30 nights between April 2014 and April 2015, the author engaged people who live and work in this area in informal conversations focused on livelihood dynamics

and local hierarchies. This ranged from people who beg in the area to the Officer in Charge of the local police station (*thana*). It also included four children who work as beggar assistants. A further eight semi-structured interviews were conducted on and around these pavements with adults who live and beg here. All semi-structured interviews and approximately half of the evenings of participant observation were supported by a research assistant. A major challenge encountered was the reticence of many beggars to speak openly about the collective organisation and hierarchies in the area. Many of those who beg were initially suspicious of the researcher, and in some cases this persisted, for example the *samiti* leader Anwar continued to deny the existence of the association he ran throughout the research.

Begging in Public Imagination: Crime and Destitution

Beggars have been a central character in the cast of towns and cities throughout history. The basis on which beggars receive alms is socially constructed according to local notions of deservedness, typically involving deprivation and vulnerability, and often embedded within religious notions of piety and duty. At the same time, those who beg are also widely and long-standingly understood in a contrasting light, as a dramatological veneer for criminality. Begging is routinely perceived as being orchestrated by deceptive individuals and lucrative syndicates, which prey on the gullible and giving, and exploit children and people with disabilities. This section maps such characterisations, indicating their consistency across contexts, and influence over public policy.

Images of begging as “criminal” are long established. In Elizabethan England, for example, begging was often portrayed as a menace, intimately tied to vagrancy, and a world of counterfeit begging licences, crafted wounds, feigning epilepsy, and the authority of an “upright man,” the “uncrowned king of the beggars” (Salgado 1977, 121). This period gave rise to the “rogue literature,” pamphlets on the exploits of beggars loosely based on interviews with such figures themselves and portraying a society “as tightly knit as that of Elizabethan England as a whole” (Salgado 1977, 129). Centuries later, the English journalist Mayhew (2012) detailed the colourful exploits of beggars on the streets of Victorian London for a new generation. This explored the various guises and tactics they reportedly deployed, such as “screeving” (relying on letters and petitions) and “the Spanish lurk” (pretending to be an injured member of the Spanish legion). Contemporary and geographically diverse literature consistently notes how begging is often perceived as an opaque activity, in part distrusted by the public (Devlieger 2018, 461), and often finding criminalising responses in public policy intent on discipline and control (Bromley 1981, 24; Dean 1999, 219). More nuanced yet nevertheless contrasting characterisations can be found in the debates surrounding legal cases involving beggars in the USA, where begging is portrayed as either disruptive of the urban social order or a right to be protected (Cockburn 2013).

The idea of begging as a façade for crime is a familiar one in South Asia. Prior to partition, the noted Indian academic Radhakamal Mukerjee (1945, 23) describes the “gang or guild life of the beggars” in urban India, which “train” others in the art of begging, and constitutes a “shadowy organisation which has its Sirdars [leader, headman] or capitalists and a large number of intermediaries,” although without reference to cases or supporting evidence. Exemplary of international imaginations of India, the 2008 film *Slumdog Millionaire* portrays the gangster beggar leader, who trains children to beg, reaping the profit; while the “beggarmaster” in Rohinton Mistry’s 1995 book *A Fine Balance* gives a more complex yet still ruthless image of the orchestration behind a city’s beggars.

In Bangladesh, while begging is rarely studied, cases of alleged criminal groups sitting behind beggars occasionally reach the news. Hammadi and Burke (2011) for example write in *The Guardian* of a man arrested in Dhaka for reportedly abducting and maiming children to use as beggars, referring to a “senior gang member,” and the gangs of approximately 500 beggars who operate under a *sardar* (leader, headman). Others substantiate such a view, arguing that there are more than 30,000 beggars in Dhaka under the control of 100 such figures, characterised as a “beggar mafia,” although without serious empirical investigation (see Helal and Kabir 2013). Such perceptions are fed by events before Eid, where the streets of Bangladeshi towns and cities see a huge influx of beggars in public spaces, particularly at traffic intersections and jams. A report in the leading English language daily for example reads:

These people asking you for money could actually be earning more than you did this month. They are probably not poor or physically challenged at all. From toddlers to octogenarians and pretend handicaps to homeless, all amateur part-time beggars throng the capital ahead of Eid to grab a slice of what is apparently a large pie (*The Daily Star*, July 7, 2015).

To be clear, organised and criminal exploitation of the vulnerable is commonplace in Bangladesh. Children living precariously on the streets and other open spaces are routinely used by political cadre in criminal activities and even political violence (see Atkinson-Sheppard 2019, Jackman 2019b). Yet by deploying the lexicon of “organised crime,” or questioning the intentions of beggars, the sense created is that where hierarchy and organisation exists among beggars they must be reflective of criminality. This then evokes a set of assumptions about the forms of organisation found. Namely that they are fraudulent, likely exploitative, unlawful, and organised with the explicit intention of criminality. Given that the discourse of organised crime itself emerged principally through the 20th century (Varese 2017), this implicitly casts such hierarchies as modern or at least in distinctly modern terms. It also creates the impression that “organised crime” can be neatly demarcated from wider forms of hierarchy and organisation, which much recent literature from South Asia has questioned (see, for example, Price and Ruud 2010; Michelutti et al. 2018; Jackman 2019a).

It is in part such discourse that feeds government policies towards the regulation of begging and treatment of beggars themselves. After returning to power in 2009 Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has made numerous public declarations to end begging in Dhaka and wider Bangladesh. She has called for beggars to be “rehabilitated” and decried both that some beggars are “professional,” and that there are beggar leaders to whom others give a cut of their earnings (*The Daily Star*, January 3, 2016). In 2011, for example, the government passed the “Vagrant and Shelterless Persons (Rehabilitation) Act,” which in effect updates the British era 1943 Vagrancy Act. Critics decry the Act for reinforcing the coercive function of the original legislation, criminalising begging and enforcing rehabilitation under poor conditions. In a similar vein, since 2014, “no begging zones” have been introduced in strategic “VIP” areas across the city as an initiative under the Social Welfare Ministry in partnership with Dhaka’s city corporations. Although to dubious effect, these have been indicated by a triangular yellow sign, reading “beggar free zone” in Bengali, featuring a woman in a green sari palm reaching out with a red cross running through it.

There are sufficient media reports to reasonably assume that egregiously criminal organisations do lie behind some of the begging seen routinely on the streets of Dhaka, as also in cities across the world. It is also however important to recognise that a host of terms – such as mafia, rackets, gangs, and syndicates – are widely used without careful consideration or what they denote; nor is there a clear sense in the public domain of the

scale of such organisations. The prevalence of such images in popular imagination furthermore comes with the risk that they blind us to other forms of hierarchy and association which play a meaningful part in organising begging in this context and beyond. Though little recognised, there is important and diverse evidence for more complex forms of hierarchy, to which we now turn.

The Associational Life of Begging

There is a surprising paucity of literature on beggar hierarchies and to date little attempt to view these in comparative perspective. In Asia there are detailed studies from China (Lu 2005) and Japan (Ehlers 2019), and in Europe and the Middle East there are only sparse references to beggar organisations, yet little analysis. The intention of this section is to draw such work together to explore whether there are commonalities in how beggars have been organised across diverse contexts and position this against the image of beggar hierarchies seen in popular discourse. It is argued that there is widespread historical evidence of hierarchically structured beggar organisations, formed at a municipal or sub-municipal level to protect the interests of those who beg, regulate the activity, and mediate their relationship to wider society. Rather than be viewed principally through the lens of “organised crime” the examples suggest viewing beggars through the lens of work, organised in similar ways to groups of labourers, artisans, and other professional groups.

Available literature reveals two broad forms of organisation can be found, at least historically, among beggars: guilds and mutual aid associations. Guilds are typically studied as the professional bodies found among artisan and merchant groups in Western European cities from the medieval period through to the late 18th century. Recently a broader perspective has begun to emerge exploring how guilds were in fact common across much of the world, and in some cases existed until the 20th century (see Lucassen, 2008). In line with this agenda, references to beggar guilds can be found in the cities of Istanbul and Aleppo, in Spain and Russia, China and Japan, while other sources and cases likely exist in other languages. In Japan for example we hear of the hereditary community of *hinin*, heads of household translated as “beggar bosses,” who formed communities that were regulated through “guilds” and maintained a monopoly on begging rights in certain areas (see Ehlers 2011, 2019). Studying a small mountainous town called Ōno and a “warrior-governed castle town” of Osaka, Ehlers (2019, 127) describes the granting of land to illiterate homeless people in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, communities which formed into separate compounds, each of which “constituted a self-governing guild of beggar bosses.” These communities absorbed other similarly marginalised people, whilst also emerging as hereditary communities, with positions of leadership such as “compound chief” passed through lineage. Community members paid their dues or fees to their respective beggar guilds, and in return received the exclusive right of access to designated blocks of the city to collect alms. “Shares” in the guilds could even be “bought, sold, and pawned among *hinin*,” and some *hinin* became wealthy enough to own agricultural land and engage in moneylending (Ehlers 2019, 133). These guilds were regulated by the town’s officials, who also used guild beggars to provide municipal services, most notably the role of “watchmen,” patrolling and policing the towns, controlling criminals and unregulated beggars.

Prior to the Communist Revolution, similar organisations appear to have been widely seen also in China. Lu (2005, 6) provides a detailed account of the “spontaneously formed and autonomously run beggars’ guilds” found in urban areas. These existed based on tacit or explicit endorsement from local authorities, with their “headman” often directly

appointed by local officials and influential figures or inherited as a status. They were simultaneously involved in the threatening extraction of “beggar tax” from local businesses, and in certain contexts linked to “mafia” and referred to as “gangs,” whilst also, as in Japan, closely associated with local policing, controlling vagrants and petty criminals, and playing other municipal roles such as waste disposal. In the early 20th century for example, one of Shanghai’s eight beggar headmen was also a tax inspector and detective, and a chief detective in the city was himself a former beggar. In addition to providing localised order, these hierarchies have also at moments had wider political significance. China’s first president Yuan Shikai, for example, mobilised the beggar heads of Beijing through an advisor to sign a petition seeking his restoration as emperor (Lu 2005, 39).

Sparse references from further afield suggest that beggar “guilds” were a common form of organisation among the beggars in much of the world. In the Ottoman empire there is evidence of “state sanctioned professional guilds” of beggars during the 17th century (Çelik 2017, 219). Citing a traveller’s account of Istanbul from the period, Çelik (2017, 218) notes the description of a beggar guild, the “Elder Beggars’ Artisans” who in the year 1638 had around seven thousand members in the city, led by a head of the beggars, a certain el-Seyh Safi. Similarly in 18th century Aleppo, Marcus (1989, 214–215) notes the presence of a “shahhatin,” a guild of professional beggars, led by a “shaykh” appointed by a shariah court, and regulated according to a code of conduct. In tracing the antecedents of a modern blind people’s organisation in Spain, Garvía (2016) highlights the history of blind beggar guilds across Europe. These were membership associations, to which beggars paid a fee, and which played multiple functions, including regulating access to begging within certain areas, and offering a degree of protection in the eventuality of illness. In Spain, such associations were founded as far back as the 14th century in cities such as Barcelona and Valencia. In the case of the “brotherhood of the blind” in Valencia, if a member found another ill, they were required to share their alms with them for a period of a week (Garvía 2016, 6).

Elsewhere hierarchies have been identified which feel analogous to these, although more removed from the influence of the state. Between the early 19th century and mid 20th century in Russia, there similarly existed associations known as *artel*, hierarchically organised yet co-operatively spirited groups among the workers from trades or groups. Varese (2001, 162) quotes a late 19th century Russian source to describe the “beggars’ *artel*” of the period. These are portrayed as “guilds” run by a “guild-master” (most often a blind beggar), with new members being elected into the group and paying subscriptions, on condition of tests and joining ceremonies orchestrated by the master. Cohen (1969, 44) writes of the “full time” beggars in urban Nigeria as distinguished by “category” of disability, each organised into an association, governed by a “chief” who managed such organisations according to “structures and rules.” The chiefs of the blind, lepers and so on are paid “tribute” by their members, who in return are provided accommodation, a guide to the blind, and allocated place to beg. Staples (2003) similarly highlights how people from a leper colony in India formed together into small group to beg under the leadership of a *maistry* (leader, labour leader), who often had the role of moneylender, and took a larger share of the group’s earnings.

References to guilds appear to end by the mid 20th century. In China, the beggar “guilds” referred to above were dismantled through the Communist Revolution, with the creation of mass detainment camps and the deportation of beggars to the countryside (Lu 2005). By the late 20th century however there has been the resurgence of beggars’ hierarchies operating over delineated territories. Ethnographic work from 1970s Taipei in Taiwan, for example, documents a neighbourhood community of beggars, operating

under the authority of a figure who emerged as a “beggar chief” and then became a “neighbourhood head,” and as such a low-level city official (Schak 1988, 152). Known as influential among the beggars and poor, he was a valuable asset for politicians in providing vote banks in elections, and in controlling gambling for the police. For the community of beggars, he was an intermediary, mediating their relationship to the city and wider society, and regulating their behaviour, solving disputes, and negotiating with other beggar groups, even at one point considering forming a “union” for beggars in northern Taipei (Schak 1988, 150).

There is also evidence of a further form of association amongst beggars, which has been little documented, and is not one that conforms to the criminal portrayal of popular culture. This takes the form of a “mutual aid association,” often known as “savings and credit associations” of either the rotating (ROSCA) or accumulating kind (Bouman 1995, 371). In the UK these are often referred to as “friendly societies.” Historically mutual aid association in many ways replaced guilds as a source of co-operation and association for working people and became popular in the UK from around the early 18th century. That such friendly societies also existed among beggars is not however widely recognised. In Spain for example, although blind beggar guilds declined alongside guilds more widely, informal forms of “mutual-support societies” reportedly continued among the blind beggars in cities (Garvía 2016, 10). A further intriguing example comes from the journalist Henry Mayhew’s (2012) account of 19th century beggars in London. Mayhew describes a “society” called the “Cadger’s Club” (“cadger” being roughly equivalent to scrounger) that met at the Coachmakers’ Arms pub in London. The Cadger Club was intended as a mutual self-help society for beggars against arrest or sickness, and would today be referred to as a ROSCA. According to his account of one beggar:

We paid 3d. a week each – no women were members – for thirteen weeks, and then shared what was in hand, and began for the next thirteen, receiving new members and transacting the usual business of a club. This has been discontinued these five years; the landlord cut away with the funds. We get up raffles, and help one another in the best way we can now. At one time we had forty-five members, besides the secretary, the conductor, and under-conductor. The rules were read over on meeting nights – every Wednesday evening.

While in this instance collective savings and support appear to have defined this “club,” it should be highlighted that the cases from China and Taiwan also indicate how savings and credit can be integrated into more far-reaching beggar hierarchies. In the case of the Chinese guilds, for example, beggars contributed a “certain percentage of their daily gains to the beggar heads to be saved for emergency needs, and they were entitled to use the funds in case of sickness or death” (Lu 2005, 121). Similarly in the Taipei case from the 1970s, an important role played by the “beggar chief” was managing a ROSCA, which was primarily used as a way of refurbishing housing (Schak 1988, 72).

The examples encountered in the literature thus nuance the idea of beggar hierarchies as “organised crime” in a number of ways. First, some cases suggest that rather than existing in opposition to the state, beggar organisations were often in fact closely regulated by state authorities, at times as guilds. Second, they suggest that one form of hierarchy seen among beggars are “mutual aid associations,” which are certainly not beyond the purview of criminality (see Jackman 2019b). However this is not a simple story of “beggar mafia.” Third, and most importantly, they collectively suggest that an alternative prism through which to view these hierarchies is one of work. The organisational forms sketched here are striking in their similarity to those found more broadly among professional and labour groups. This then resonates with recent literature which has argued that people who beg often conceive of the activity as a form of labour or work (Devlieger 2018; Lenhard 2021).

For these authors the view of begging as work seems to stem from the fact that conforming to socially constructed notions of deserving alms requires performance, strategy, and hard graft. In Kinshasa, for example, this is seen in the use of documents by beggars to facilitate donations, imitating the bureaucracy of the state and practices of NGOs, and serving as a mechanism for socially legitimising begging (Devlieger 2018). In Paris this means strategically building personal connections, conforming to notions of deservingness and neediness through “scripts and hustles” (Lenhard 2021, 797). This article thus builds on such insight to examine how, if begging is indeed work, it is in practice organised.¹

The cases highlighted are however far from uniform. The degree to which they are tacitly endorsed and regulated by state authorities differs notably. Some appear institutionalised and long-standing, while others are more spontaneous and local. Some mediate relationships to state and political authorities in wide-ranging ways, while others have a far more limited set of roles. Leaders within these contexts played multifaceted roles, both coercive and supportive. Yet common empirically across most of these examples are the roles of leaders in mediating relationships to wider society in the context of an organisation, thereby anchoring the roles of beggars locally, and that this relationship is premised on some form of fee, tribute, or financial contribution. Though these examples are historical, the following analysis from the streets of Dhaka suggests similar hierarchies continue today.

Beggar Bosses and Cart Pushers in Dhaka City

People are drawn to the pavements outside the Supreme Court of Dhaka primarily on account of the *mazar* and mosque found inside the Court premises, where *kichuri* (a popular rice and lentil dish) is distributed daily to the poor at lunchtime. In previous decades, not hundreds but thousands of people lived here, and the area was so busy it was like a “*faqir* junction” (a *faqir* being a Muslim ascetic), as a prominent beggar named Anwar put it. Instead of sleeping on the pavement, people used to rest on the field inside the court grounds, where crowds gathered at night playing music, reciting stories and poetry while smoking marijuana, all within sight of the old High Court building. Such activities have been curtailed, with various ministries and initiatives attempting sporadically to “rehabilitate” beggars, occasionally in the form of abduction and incarceration in a government shelter. More recently politically sensitive legal proceedings – the “International Crimes Tribunal” – have meant that people are not even allowed to sleep inside the *mazar*, fewer songs are sung, and less drugs consumed. It is nonetheless still, as locals described it, a spiritual place associated with begging, where miracles are claimed to occur, and film companies look to the area to recruit people as beggars and *pagol* (“crazy” people) for their productions.

Cart Pushers and Beggars with Disabilities

Most beggars here know each other well. Many have lived on these pavements for decades, and some from even before Bangladesh was born. Some are so rooted in the area that they have a national identification (ID) card attesting to the fact. Rajak, a long-term resident, came as a child after his mother died, his father remarried then became a *faqir*, giving away the family land. With three witnesses testifying to his identity, including one of the local flower sellers and a relative by marriage who is a peon at the court, Rajak attained an ID card with his address listed as the “High Court water pump,” giving him the right to vote in the constituency. Unlike Rajak, however, most in the area are closely

tied to village homes. As Anwar – a prominent local beggar – described it: “Everyone here has children. They have to send money home. They have parents. Everyone has someone.” While this is an exaggeration, it is true that only a minority are entirely isolated from homes and families elsewhere.² Some abandoned or widowed women fit this category and rely on the handouts at the *mazar*, beg nearby, and find solace in the small community of other women in such circumstances, and the support of a nearby NGO.

Most beggars, however, have families in their *bari* (an ancestral, often village home) and migrate to the city to fund rural lives with urban money. The pattern this takes differs. Some come for a whole year and earn enough to repair or build a house in their village or pay dowry costs. Some stay for half of each month, having earned enough to live and return cyclically to their village. Some commute for the week and return at the weekend. Some come only during religious festivals. Some come only during winter to beg and collect the blankets that are ostentatiously handed out seasonally by charitable groups or individuals (the “blanket thieves” as they were referred to locally). In previous decades, regular journeys or trusted intermediaries were obligatory to deliver money back to families, but today arrangements have been dramatically simplified with the introduction of the digital money transfer service BKash. In many respects then the migratory pattern and role of begging mirrors that for wider groups of the urban poor, such as many market labourers or rickshaw riders, and can be commonly found among beggars in cities across South Asia (see Massey, Rafique, and Seeley 2010). Although most living here are regulars, others can come, lie down and sleep for the night, and are watched carefully by locals, who measure their behaviour and whether they can be trusted.

Often, beggars refer to their activities as begging (*bhikha kara*), and themselves and others as beggars (*bhikkhuk*). At the same time, they often refer to it as work (*kaj kara*), hard work (*kosto kari*, *kaja kari*), or sometimes as a business (*bebsha*). These descriptions do not seem to contradict each other in this context. Many of the beggars in the area are physically disabled, paralysed, amputees, suffering from leprosy, or other chronic diseases. Of these, some work three or four days a week and live on that money, while others work six days a week, and all tend to rest on Saturdays when few people give alms (and to “stop burning in the sun every day,” as one put it). Though they stay outside the Supreme Court, they most often beg in other areas. According to Anwar, “There is a ‘map’ where you should go each day. Today it’s Friday, so it’s the Supreme Court ... Then another day it’s good to go to Shahbagh, Press Club, Doynek Bangla Circle, Paltan Circle ...”

To follow this “map,” some beggars with disabilities push themselves in wheelchairs, but many use small wooden carts on wheels. To do such work, these beggars need to employ assistants. Many beggars are thus also bosses.³ The relationship between a beggar and assistant is the most foundational and widespread form of hierarchy found in this context. Assistants are often young boys who are strong enough to push a cart but not yet teenagers, and who are not, in general, initially known to the beggar. Instead, these assistants are collected, as it was described, mainly from the country’s largest train station, Kamalapur station, where many young children arrive having run away from home. Others are found from an NGO centre for street children in Arambagh, an area to the East of the Supreme Court. Anwar, for example, had a new assistant, a young boy called Tohin.

Anwar: He’s just arrived. I brought him here today from Kamalapur station. I sent someone who lives here to get him. I need a new boy so that’s why he was brought here.

Tohin: The man asked me, “do you want to work?,” I said yes. He said that if he makes 1,000, then he will take 500 and I will have 500. We will share whatever we get.

Anwar: Let’s see what happens. If it works then I will keep him, if it doesn’t work, then I’ll get rid of him.

The two were yet to work together and Tohin already seemed to be annoying Anwar. Tohin was planning on sending the money back to his mother in the Northeast, and this would help his younger brother who Tohin claimed was such a good singer that he would make them “*lakh lakh taka*” in the future.⁴

The relationship between an assistant and beggar is crucial to this work, and extremely common. Assistants not only help beggars beg, but also support them in daily life. They help them wash, get dressed, arrange food and tea, run errands, and return home when needed, accompanying them on the bus journey, putting their wheelchair or cart on the top of the bus. Mamun, for example, has been living outside the Court for 12 years, ever since he had an accident falling from a tree in his home village in Madaripur district, injuring his spine, and leaving him paralysed from the waist down: “My hands are fine, but from here down I can’t even feel if you pinch me. I have no feeling here. I am on earth, but I don’t belong here.” Mamun used to work in the fields cutting crops as a day labourer, and also occasionally as a fisherman, but after the accident was left without options and came to Dhaka, leaving behind his wife in the village. Despite this, he has two children who are both in school, and he returns to the village every four or five months.

Mamun is supported by Imran, a young boy whose home village is in the district of Mymensingh. Imran’s only relative is a step-mother, who he has not seen for years, and has instead lived around the Kamalapur station area. It was from an NGO centre in the area (a prominent local NGO working with street boys in the city) that Imran came to work with Mamun, who tends to speak for him in our interactions. “I’ve been here a few months,” said Imran. “The boy grew up with me,” said Mamun defensively. When Imran was asked if he sometimes returned home, Mamun answered: “he doesn’t have parents there. Why would he go? If someone doesn’t have parents, where will he go for food? Where will he go for sleep? If you work, you can have rice. If you don’t work, you won’t have.” Imran guides Mamun around the city in his wooden cart, visiting different spots every day except Saturdays when Imran has the day off, roaming around different tea shops and across the city alone. If Mamun thinks Imran has been naughty, and needs a good lesson, he uses the thick stick, which he keeps wedged next to his legs in the cart. Though Mamun employs Imran, their relationship is then far denser and more multifaceted than this implies. It is not in practice regulated by any formal contract or law, and resembles the complex interdependencies denoted through concepts such as patron-clientelism, and long studied on the sub-continent and beyond.⁵ As Mamun described it: “We are *rasta kangali* [the destitute of the streets], we eat on the streets, we live on the streets, we survive together. I can’t move without him. And his food and medicine, and all the responsibilities, are mine. Whether it’s one taka, five taka or 5,000 taka. I have responsibility for his life.”

Beggars can earn anywhere between a couple of hundred and 1,000 taka per day, and more during religious periods such as Ramadan. For lone beggars their income is therefore comparable to many other groups of the labouring poor in the city such as day labourers and rickshaw drivers and can even be similar to that of lower middle-class professionals working in offices (Jackman 2017, 257). Beggars are often however coy about their income, aware that there are rumours and suspicions around their wealth. This income is also highly vulnerable to shocks in the begging eco-system. Drives against street

vendors, political protests such as strikes, international events (such as cricket competitions), and indeed a global pandemic, all have major implications for the stability of beggar incomes.⁶

In general, assistants such as Tohin and Imran are paid in one of two ways. Either, they take a daily cut of the earnings – typically 50% – or they are paid a salary (*beton*). This is a fixed rate paid in cash at the end of the month. At the time of research a common figure cited was a not inconsiderable 10,000 taka. Together beggars often also save around 20 taka per day from their takings, to be used when their cart needs fixing. The inequality between beggar and assistant can be exploitative, beyond the obvious respects of child labour. Beggars, for example, described how certain people among them would stop paying their assistant or make excuses to delay the salary at the end of the month. In one case, an assistant who had not been paid sought the help of other beggars and assistants who all gathered and helped him receive his salary. They grabbed the guilty beggar and lifted him off his seat to find that he had “all the money in the world” under his chair, around two or three hundred thousand taka, as one described it. Instead of paying the salary, this “characterless cripple,” as he was referred to, would find a new assistant every month. Assistants are not always passive. Even where they are not able to dominate the beggar with a disability, they subvert the relationship in subtle ways. One example heard from Imran was of how they would siphon off a small amount of the money they collect on behalf of the beggar.

Not all cart pushers are children. The self-declared oldest beggar in the area is Iqbal who has begged near the Supreme Court since before Bangladesh’s Liberation in 1971. His assistant, who is in his mid-40s, has worked with him for 22 years, and before working together, was a labourer and assistant for a van driver. Both have connections with their village homes, and the assistant supports two daughters who are studying in the village school. Iqbal’s connections are more remote; being blind and with leprosy, people rarely come near or touch him, and he relies entirely on his assistant for support. Where assistants are adults it can be them who has the authority in the relationship. For example, Naseema, another beggar in the area, has been a cart pusher for several years, working her way around different areas every day pushing an elderly man with a disability. She does not however know the man well. In fact, she does not even know his name, having found him at the nearby Dhaka Medical College, after he was hospitalised and no-one came to collect him. She managed to take charge of him and wheels around the cart using him to beg. Whatever money they earn she keeps to support her two children in the village, and she feeds the man and keeps him alive. She explained: “This is Allah’s will, whoever cares for the helpless will be blessed.”

A “Beggars’ Association”

The relationships between cart pushers and beggars with disabilities are not the only form of hierarchy found on these pavements.⁷ The beggars in the area have for decades been organised collectively into associations or societies, forming as early as the 1960s during the Pakistan period. Beggars describe these through a range of terms including the English “group,” *sangstha* (organisation), and *samiti* and *sangathan* (both meaning association/society). The first of these associations was termed *bastohara* (homeless) *samiti*, while another emerged as *pangu sangstha* (disabled people’s organisation). The term *samiti* can denote associations with a variety of intents and interests. When studied among the urban poor *samiti* most fundamentally refer to mutual aid associations, which although little recognised, are extremely common in work and community settings in

Bangladesh. These are often oriented around savings and credit but play larger roles such as organising and protecting their members, and promoting the authority and interests of their leaders (see Rutherford 1997; Devine 2006; Jackman 2019b). These associations are identified locally as having been ran by respected elderly beggars such as the late Nur Islam, Nuzrul Islam, and Arab Ali, who lived on the pavement and at the *mazar*, and were the *neta* (leader), the *shobhapati* (president), *chairman* and *sardar* (labour leader) of the associations, as it was put on different occasions.⁸

These associations and leaders played several roles, including local dispute resolution, facilitating savings and loans, distributing donations from the *mazar*, and attempting to negotiate services and resources from the government. When donations are made to the *mazar*, the donor typically creates an agreement with staff to donate food, clothes, or other items to a certain number of people. One role of these beggar leaders was then to distribute these donations among the beggars, which they were seen as doing fairly, making sure even those furthest away in the court grounds still received their fair share.⁹ When local disputes or fights occurred between beggars, it was these leaders who would mediate, solving local problems and creating peace among the community. If police caused any of the beggars issues, it was again these beggar leaders who were informed to promptly solve the issue and negotiate with government officials or politicians.

In return, members of the association would give ten *taka* subscription or fee (*chanda*) as Mamun described it (as people do in *samiti* across Dhaka and Bangladesh), while others spoke of giving roughly 25% of a day's earnings. This generation of leaders died a couple of years prior to research, however a local NGO fieldworker who had worked in the area for years, described meeting Nur Islam:

I only met him a couple of times before he died, but I could see he was a good man. His behaviour was good. He was honest with people and had the capacity to manage them, that's why he was their *sardar*. Whatever money people would give him, then he would give them that money back to them at the end. I know he used to have a good situation – he had four or five rickshaws – he used to give out loans from the *samiti* money and take interest.

A prominent crime journalist who interviewed the old beggar *sardar* in the early 2000s described them not as having “four or five rickshaw,” but in fact being very wealthy. Nur Islam reportedly owned more than 20 rickshaws, a car, and land in *kamrangichar basti* (a slum in the south-west of Dhaka), and was even able to send his son abroad to be educated.

Their associations, however, are seen as a failure locally, and people look back at them with disregard and disappointment. The associations were reportedly given tin sheeting by an NGO and managed to build an office, attempting to negotiate with the government to be given public land, and encouraging members to submit applications to receive government papers, as it was described. In practice, beggars lamented all the costs – the rickshaw fares, the tea money, the money for typing and applying for papers they had had to give – when, at the end of the day, they received nothing in return.

This portrayal aligns with a rare newspaper report from over a decade ago that suggested a high degree of organisation among beggars in the city (*Daily Star*, February 12, 2007). The investigation indicates Dhaka city was divided into different areas each controlled by a leader and an assistant, working under the umbrella of a beggar association led by a *mahajan* (boss, leader, traditional money lender). The association leaders are portrayed as wealthy, giving out loans from the association fund, with beggars outside of this system prevented from begging on the city streets, and beggar leaders even providing political parties with manpower for political events and violence. A journalist who knew these *sardar* recalled the strength of Arab Ali, leader of the association *pangu sangstha*, crippled with leprosy and aided by an assistant. Despite being drug addicted, he was

powerful locally and when arrested in the early 2000s on account of his role among the beggars, he was able to mobilise 200 beggars to protest, which they apparently did by roaming the streets and biting policemen.¹⁰

Beggars on the pavements near the Supreme Court today have no association of the ambition seen in previous decades. They do, however, have a *samiti*, led by an unlikely figure, the almost entirely paralysed beggar Anwar. Anwar described being disabled from childhood, and coming to the area in 1979. Although he lived for many years on the pavement, today he lives in a residence not far away to the south in Old Dhaka, and comes to the area every morning until late evening. Locals see him as one of the few “upper class” or “developed” beggars left in the area. Unlike the *sardar*, Anwar does not distribute goods from the *mazar*. Nor do people give him a daily cut of their earnings. For many beggars even the suggestion of giving someone else a cut of their daily takings was ridiculous: “Why would I give the money I earn and need to pay for my child’s school fees to a leader? Tell me that” was one response. Another was from a young woman: “if anyone tried to take any money from me I would kick his arse!” Instead, Anwar is the *samiti cashier* (cashier) and President, supported by a fellow beggar Delwar who is the Secretary. Locals not in the *samiti* somewhat derogatorily call it the *lengra samiti* (cripples’ association).¹¹

The *samiti* is described as having been running for 10–15 years. One member described the basic principle of the *samiti*: “you pay 10 taka per name; if you give 10 names you give 100 taka. You have to give every day.” Anwar’s *samiti* gives interest of 5% a year on deposits made by members, while charging between five and ten per cent interest per month on loans he makes from the *samiti* fund. As Mamun described it:

They don’t lend money. They just profit. Say if you take the money on the first day of the month, you already have to give interest on the first day of the next month. It’s 10% per month. If you can’t pay the interest, you have to give interest on all of it next month. Say you take a loan for 50,000 taka, next month the interest is 5,000 taka, but you can’t pay it back, so the month after you’ll pay interest also on the 5,000 taka.

Every year Anwar and Delwar organise an event where the group’s members can collect their money and choose whether to re-deposit it. For each name they have with the *samiti* they also get a portion of chicken biryani.¹² Despite being well known locally as running the *samiti* for a number of years, Anwar consistently pretended to me that no such *samiti* existed. In his own words:

If someone wants to make a new *samiti*, they need a well-educated person. But disabled people like us can’t do that. Someone who has only lost one of his hands, he might be able to write. Someone who can go up two or three stories of stairs. If we want to form something, we need an educated person like this, who has at least one hand.

The implication of this was that Anwar, without any working limbs, could not possibly be in charge of a *samiti*. Locals, however, describe him as in fact being able to write with one of his hands in a small ledger book. Anwar on several occasions would portray his life as hopeless, having no money left over at the end of the day after paying for his assistant’s meals, and then, “At the time of death, let it happen ... what’s the use of saving? You know the story of us people living here? We will eat here, we will sleep here, and when God calls, we will leave here. We don’t need any *sangathan*.” Perhaps part of the explanation for why Anwar is secretive about his *samiti* is because of the reputation it has locally. Several beggars around the Supreme Court who were not within Anwar’s *samiti* complained about the low rate of interest received, and the amount of profit he earned. As Mamun put it:

It’s like bamboo up the arse! The guy who will manage the *samiti*, he will have all the profits, and he will give me only the bones and the sticks. Say you establish a *samiti* and have 50 members. If you can accumulate 50,000 *taka* then you can lend it to someone for profit, 10% per month, 120%

per year. You are making 100 *taka* per 1,000, per month so you have 5,000 *taka* profit per month. So, in 11 months how much profit would it be? And what would they give us?

Others described the *samiti* as not investing the money, but immorally charging interest, engaging in usury. Anwar was described as talking in “an upside-down way,” employing “rotten assistants” who he does not pay properly and who therefore leave him regularly. Rather than feeding them well, he takes assistants to his house where they are given some daal and *alu bharta* (spiced mashed potato), while he would eat the more nutritious beef or fish. Despite being wealthy, “every morning he comes outside the Dhaka Press Club where he lies on the floor shaking his legs and rolling about reciting religious texts,” as one local complained. While Anwar described having moved into a home when he got married, others associate the transition with when he started his *samiti*. Anwar by his own description has been able to help his family through begging: “I have enabled my parents to live, I have been able to raise my brother well, I’ve maintained my own family, I’m making my children human.” Anwar’s younger brother has been educated to postgraduate level, and works for a cosmetics company, earning a 50,000 *taka* salary per month. Anwar also has two sons, both in a school in Old Dhaka, and wants them to gain doctorate degrees in the future.

The *samiti* Secretary Delwar was similarly portrayed as wealthy. During fieldwork Delwar’s wife died. Being a participant in a project run by a nearby NGO designed to help those living on the pavement, the project staff decided they should help with the burial. An NGO fieldworker described attending the funeral: “When we arrived, we realised we had no weight there ... I saw all his relatives were coming on motorcycles. All of them are ‘heavy heavy’ [wealthy]. Then one of his relatives told me that Delwar owns a 5-storey building in Jatrabari! You see the people who beg a lot have both cars and houses.”

The problem with Delwar, according to this fieldworker, was that he could not stop begging. She described him as saying: “sister, it’s my addiction, I can’t live without begging.” It was in part the presence of this *samiti* that meant that the NGOs’ own attempts at drawing beggars in the area into their own savings scheme largely failed.¹³ For non-members, such *samiti* are then often lambasted as unreliable, serving only the interests of the leaders, and often disappearing and failing. Many have tales of the different failed associations they have been part of over the years. On one occasion a beggar looked back at the history of the associations he had belonged to, angry about all the money lost. Asked who took it, he replied “a tiger!”

Conclusion

This portrayal of begging hierarchies on the pavements outside Dhaka’s Supreme Court has intended to disrupt the dominant image of beggars as controlled by “mafia” and suggest a historical lineage through which other forms of associations and leadership can be read. Although begging is not commonly conceived of as work involving employment relations and labour organisations, the relationships and associations found here in many ways mirror those seen more broadly among the labouring poor. In Dhaka, beggars employ assistants who they paid on a daily or monthly basis, often conceive of begging as work or business, and form associations which historically regulated and represented their activities, and today more loosely provide a form of protection through a *samiti*. The form of association and terminology through which hierarchies are referred to all resemble those found among market labourers, municipal sweepers, and other forms of manual labour. These do not resemble the types of “organised crime” often imagined as existing hierarchically among beggars, even if they can be exploitative.

It should however be acknowledged that the picture in Dhaka city is not uniform. Wider research in several other sites in the city did not reveal beggar “gangs” and “mafia,” however did hint at far more exploitative arrangements. It is difficult for example not to be struck by the maimed and disfigured children paraded at junctions in commercial and high-end residential areas. During Ramadan it was portrayed as common for children with disabilities to be rented out by their families for a couple of hundred taka a day to beg. NGO staff in a centre not far from the Supreme Court described the rare case of a local woman who had mutilated her young daughter, by putting her into a pot of boiling daal so she would be disabled and used to beg. Furthermore, in some contexts, *samiti* are indeed closer to notions of “organised crime” (see Jackman 2019b). This article does not then deny that flagrant criminality and exploitation are real but suggests that a primary reference point for understanding beggar hierarchies should be work and labour. Indeed, beggars themselves often object to the insinuation that they are organised in a criminal manner. Mamun put it to me like this:

Everyone eats from his own earnings. I eat from my own earning. You eat from your own earning. Some people spread fake stories that beggars have to give a lot of money to others. It's rubbish. It's creating a false case. They write this in the newspapers here and there. It's one person creating a false case about another. Do you understand? People say there's a beggar who built a 15-storey building. Did he make the building through theft? No, he made it by working. He made this by rolling [on the floor] and working hard. He didn't make the building by stealing.

This article builds on insightful cases of beggar hierarchies in China and Japan to suggest that beggar leaders and associations may not be confined to history. Examples from as far afield as London, Istanbul, Dhaka, and Shanghai, suggest this neglected aspect to the lives of beggars is global in scope. As the prominent form of self-organisation among the world's workers and poor has shifted, so too has that of beggars. We hence find similar guilds and mutual-aid associations in operation around the world, although perhaps nothing as elaborate as labour unions, despite the ambitions of one “beggar chief” in 1970s Taipei (Schak 1988, 150). All such associations are portrayed as forms of self-organisation, yet they differ in crucial respects: some have explicit or tacit endorsement from the state while others exist at a distance from officialdom; some appear to provide social and political order in microcosm whilst others undermine such order at large; some are hereditary; some regulate community life comprehensively, and others play a far more limited role. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is a shared sense that such hierarchies function to the disproportionate benefit of leaders, as seen in some of the scathing portrayals of Anwar here. Fundamental to the wealth associated with leadership appear to be the financial control over beggar incomes and savings that these figures often exercise.

One major implication of this analysis is that beggars can, in some instances, be considered political actors, organised collectively, often partly concealed from public eye, and occasionally intersecting in wider municipal and even national political life. There are hints of this in Bangladesh, be it historically where beggars have looted goods and required police control, or where they have protested the arrest of their leader, as in the example of Arab Ali. All this then raises questions for future work. Under what conditions do such associations and hierarchies emerge? How can we explain the differing degrees of legitimisation given to them by officialdom? And, perhaps most crucially, are these hierarchies largely confined to the past, or do they similarly exist unseen today on the streets of cities globally?

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to those interviewed in Dhaka, to the editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Asia* and to anonymous reviewers.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. The relevance of the question posed in this article is hinted at in these two cases, for example through intriguing references to a “leader” among a group of Indian beggars in Paris (Lenhard 2021, 797) and the “president” of a group of beggars with disabilities in Kinshasa (Devlieger 2018, 459).
2. In Lenhard’s (2021: 805) insightful study of begging in Paris, he argues that in one sense his informants “didn’t produce anything of lasting value or importance beyond their immediate ability to consume in a repetitive circuit.” Begging did however support what he terms a “labour of hope” enabling people to imagine their future. In Dhaka, by contrast, most informants begged to actively support others in the present and invest in lives and resources elsewhere, thereby enacting that future (see Jackman 2017).
3. The term “boss” has been recently deployed to refer to the entrepreneurial, coercive, often criminal and political forms of authority embodied in a wide variety of figures in the context of South Asia (see Price and Ruud 2010; Michelutti et al. 2018). These are useful reference points for understanding aspects to the authority of the characters described here, although the primary connotation intended with the term is one of a superior in a work setting.
4. A *lakh* is 100,000 and *taka* is the Bangladeshi currency. US\$1 is approximately 100 taka.
5. Writing of Southeast Asia, Scott (1972, 93) sees a patron-client relationship as an “unequal exchange relationship,” where a patron of higher socioeconomic status provides some form of “protection or benefits” in exchange for “general support and assistance, including personal services” from a client (Scott, 1972, 92).
6. Mamun described the effect of a local eviction led by city corporation to clear footpaths: “A lot of those shop owners gave me 5 taka, 10 taka. Now, none of them are here anymore. All of these have been destroyed. There used to be a lot of shops in Moghbazar. Malibag rail gate. But there aren’t anymore. If I went to the rail gate I would make 40 or 50 taka even before crossing the rail. Now, they don’t even let a crowd sit there. How can I do business there? They say “digital Bangladesh,” but are there no beggars here?”
7. Alongside the hierarchies discussed here also sit leaders of particular sufi orders (*tariqa*) who often have sway in *mazar* settings. Although a small minority of the beggars here identify spiritually with these figures and religious ideals, they are not close adherents.
8. These are the only figures in this article not anonymised, given the individuals are now deceased and that they took prominent roles within local organisations.
9. Locals contrast the honest manner in which these beggar leaders managed resources in the past with the way in which donations are allegedly misappropriated by particular religious leaders and *mazar* officials today.
10. This level of collective action among beggars was not apparent in this research. However, there are signs of it in the past. In the devastating Bengal famine of 1943, a letter from the Superintendent of Police in Bakarganj to the Assistant Inspector-General of Police described the “beggars agitation in Barisal town”:

During the month of May, 1943 almost all the beggar women of Barisal town started looting bags of rice from the loaded carts, passing through the street. On one occasion they assembled near the Collectorate building and took forcible possession of some bags of rice from a cart. On receipt of message from the Additional District Magistrate, the police hastened to the spot and dispersed the beggars. They went so far with their agitation that they started looting sundry articles from the shops and open market in the town.
11. *Lengra* is a colloquial Bengali term for someone who has a missing leg.
12. Anwar’s is not the only *samiti* in the area. Another is run by a peon at the court who also has around 100–150 members, and incorporates not only the *kangali*, but also employees and local business people. Rather than be in competition, the two *samiti* were described as working together, for example lending each other capital when they needed it.
13. Beggars were renowned as being cautious and even hostile with NGO fieldworkers. Another described beggars asking bluntly: “What will you give us? You want information, okay give us some money and we will tell you.” I was similarly treated with suspicion, with some beggars suggesting

I worked for the police or Rapid Action Battalion and was writing a report for them. On one occasion one said: “people like you come, write everything down, take a picture of me, and make money by selling our photos, but don’t give any money to us!” Before bursting into laughter.

Funding

This research was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Leverhulme Trust.

ORCID

David Jackman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7246-1138>

References

- Atkinson-Sheppard, S. 2019. *The Gangs of Bangladesh: Mastaans, Street Gangs and ‘Illicit Child Labourers’ in Dhaka*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bakarganj Superintendent of Police. 1943. Letter No. 6575E. From the Superintendent of Police, Bakarganj, to the Assistant Inspector-General of Police, Bengal. October 19, 1943. Bangladesh Archives.
- Bouman, F. 1995. “Rotating and Accumulating Savings and Credit Associations: A Development Perspective.” *World Development* 23 (3): 371–384.
- Bromley, R. 1981. “Begging in Cali: Image, Reality and Policy.” *International Social Work* 24 (2): 22–40.
- Çelik, F. 2017. “Living at the Margins of Poverty: The Begging Poor in the Ottoman Empire (1550–1750).” *Pesa International Journal of Social Studies* 3 (4): 214–219.
- Cockburn, P. 2013. “The Political Chaff from the Economic Grain? Rhetorical Accounts of the Embeddedness of Begging.” *Economy and Society* 42 (2): 281–303.
- Cohen, A. 1969. *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Towns*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dean, H. ed. 1999. *Begging Questions: Street-level Economic Activity and Social Policy Failure*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Devine, J. 2006. “NGOs, Politics and Grassroots Mobilisation: Evidence from Bangladesh.” *Journal of South Asian Development* 1 (1): 77–101.
- Devlieger, C. 2018. “Contractual Dependencies: Disability and the Bureaucracy of Begging in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo.” *American Ethnologist* 45 (4): 455–469.
- Ehlers, M. 2011. “Poor Relief and the Negotiation of Local Order in Early Modern Japan.” Unpublished PhD dissertation, Princeton University.
- Ehlers, M. 2019. “Outcastes and Ie: The Case of Two Beggar Boss Associations.” In *What is Family? Answers from Early Modern Japan*, edited by M. Berry and M. Yonemoto, 126–146. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Garvía, R. 2016. *Organizing the Blind: The Case of ONCE in Spain*. London: Routledge.
- Hammadi, S., and J. Burke. 2011. ‘Bangladesh Arrest Uncovers Evidence of Children Forced into Begging.’ *The Guardian*. 9 January. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/09/bangladesh-arrest-forced-begging>.
- Helal, M., and K. Kabir. 2013. “Exploring Cruel Business of Begging: The Case of Bangladesh.” *Asian Journal of Business and Economics* 3 (3.1): 1–14.
- Jackman, D. 2017. “Are ‘The Destitute’ Destitute? Understanding Micro-inequalities through the Concept of Defiled Surpluses.” *Environment and Urbanization* 29 (1): 251–266.
- Jackman, D. 2019a. “The Decline of Gangsters and Politicization of Violence in Urban Bangladesh.” *Development and Change* 50 (5): 1214–1238.
- Jackman, D. 2019b. “Violent Intermediaries and Political Order in Bangladesh.” *European Journal of Development Research* 31: 705–723.
- Lenhard, J. 2021. “The Hopeful Labour of Begging – Homeless People’s Struggles for a Better Life in Paris.” *EPD: Society and Space* 39 (5): 792–809.
- Lu, H. 2005. *Street Criers: A Cultural History of Chinese Beggars*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Lucassen, J., T. De Moor, and J. Van Zanden. 2008. “The Return of the Guilds: Towards a Global History of the Guilds in Pre-industrial Times.” *International Review of Social History* 53 (S16): 5–18.
- Marcus, A. 1989. *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity: Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Massey, D., A. Rafique, and J. Seeley. 2010. "Begging in Rural India and Bangladesh." *Economic and Political Weekly* 45 (14): 64–71.
- Mayhew, H. 2012. *London Labour and the London Poor*. London: Penguin. Originally published in 1861.
- Michelutti, L., A. Hoque, N. Martin, D. Picherit, P. Rollier, A. Ruud, and C. Still. 2018. *Mafia Raj: The Rule of Bosses in South Asia*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Mukerjee, R. 1945. "Causes of Beggary." In *Our Beggar Problem: How to Tackle It*, edited by J. Kumarappa, 19–26. Bombay: Fadma Publications.
- Price, P. and A. Ruud. eds. 2010. *Power and Influence in India: Bosses, Lords and Captains*. New Delhi: Routledge.
- Rutherford, S. 1997. "Informal Financial Services in Dhaka's Slums." In *Who Needs Credit? Poverty and Finance in Bangladesh*, edited by G. Wood, and I. Sharif, 351–370. Dhaka: University Press Limited.
- Salgado, G. 1977. *The Elizabethan Underworld*. London: J M Dent & Sons Ltd.
- Schak, D. 1988. *A Chinese Beggars' Den: Poverty and Mobility in an Underclass Community*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Scott, J. 1972. "Patron-client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia." *American Political Science Review* 66 (1): 91–113.
- Staples, J. 2003. "Peculiar People, Amazing Lives. A Study of Social Exclusion and Community-making among Leprosy Affected People in South India." Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London.
- Varese, F. 2001. *The Russian Mafia: Private Protection in a New Market Economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Varese, F. 2017. 'What is Organised Crime?' in *Redefining Organised Crime: A Challenge for the European Union?* edited by S. Carnevale, S. Forlati, and O. Giolo, 27–55. London: Bloomsbury.