

VOICES FROM THE PERIPHERY PRESENTS

DETAILED SURVEY REPORT ON

# SACRED COMMERCE AND EVERYDAY STRUGGLES

A SOCIO-ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE  
MAHISHAMARDINI TALA FESTIVAL, CHINSURAH

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# Introduction

At the intersection of sacred ritual and seasonal economy lies the Mahishamardini Tala Festival of Chinsurah, Hooghly, West Bengal. Held every June, this festival—devoted to Goddess Mahishamardini—is not just a religious event; it is a temporal transformation of space where people from nearby and far-off districts gather to celebrate, trade, eat, and earn. At the heart of this convergence is the four-day fair (মেলা) that accompanies the puja, attracting a mosaic of vendors, visitors, laborers, and observers.

This case study is based on field visits, interviews, and ethnographic observations conducted during the festival. It critically examines how religion, economy, gender, ethnicity, and power interact within this event. The study explores the social cartographies of the fair—who gets to sell, who gets visibility, and how everyday people experience a sacred space not merely as devotees, but as workers, earners, and bodies negotiating structures of control.





# The Festival Landscape

Mahishamardini, an iconographic form of Goddess Durga, is the central deity of this local puja. The puja committee, composed of local elites and influential residents, organizes the rituals, sets up the temple infrastructure, and supervises the entire space, including the fairground. Around the central shrine, a circular expanse of commercial stalls and informal vending zones spreads out like ripples—colorful, chaotic, and vibrant.

The fair includes a vast range of stalls:

Small to medium booths for electronics, toys, cosmetics, clothes;

Makeshift mats on the ground where women sell hair accessories, kitchen tools, or bindis;

Food stalls, sweet shops, fast-food counters;

And scattered zones of children's play, joyrides, and loudspeakers blaring film songs.

The aesthetic is festive. But beneath the spectacle lies a set of underlying structures—who sells what, who pays whom, who eats where, and who watches silently.





# Ethnographic Observations: Patterns from the Field

## SOCIO-RELIGIOUS COMPOSITION OF VENDORS

A wide array of people travel to the fair—from Howrah, Bardhaman, Hooghly, Nadia, and even Jharkhand and Bihar. Their backgrounds span across religion (Hindus and Muslims), language, and class, although all of them share the common identity of migrant vendors or local hawkers supplementing their income through this seasonal opportunity.

Despite the religious nature of the festival, vendors' religious identities were not divisive. Muslim and Hindu vendors co-existed and sold side by side, often helping each other with supplies, water, or change.

Shahid Ansari, a bangle seller from Murshidabad:

“I’ve come here for six years. No one ever asked me what religion I follow. All they ask is, ‘How much for this?’ Business doesn’t ask for religion.”

Anita Roy, saree vendor:

*“Some of my co-sellers are Muslims. We stay together, eat together. We all face the same problems: rain, no sales, committee charges. We don’t have time for politics.”*

This cohabitation of commercial space forms a counter-narrative to India’s rising communal polarization—a testimony to the ways livelihood overrides ideology.



# THE GENDERED MARKET: WHO SELLS, WHO WATCHES

The market was overwhelmingly male-dominated. Nearly all large and medium stalls were operated by men. Even in spaces selling cosmetics or sarees, women were absent from positions of power. Women vendors were found only in the most marginal parts of the fair—sitting on mats, often in pairs, selling low-value items like bindis, plastic tools, bangles, or toys.

**Parveen Bibi, footpath vendor from Katwa:**

*“We women sit on the ground, on the footpaths. No one gives us stalls. Even the committee asks men to speak for permissions. I sell hairbands, rubber bands. Girls buy from me. But I cannot earn like the big shop men.”*

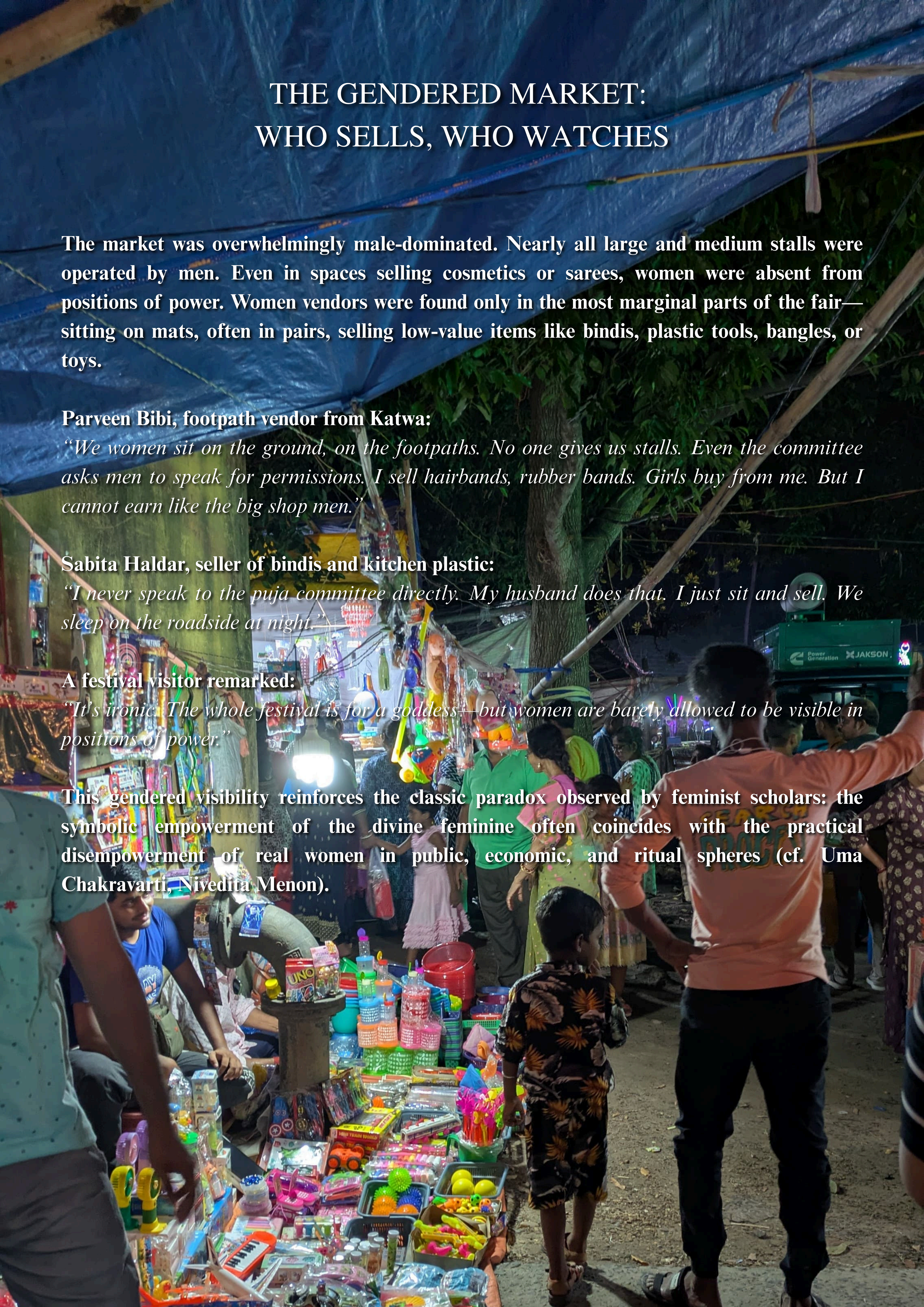
**Sabita Halдар, seller of bindis and kitchen plastic:**

*“I never speak to the puja committee directly. My husband does that. I just sit and sell. We sleep on the roadside at night.”*

**A festival visitor remarked:**

*“It’s ironic. The whole festival is for a goddess—but women are barely allowed to be visible in positions of power.”*

This gendered visibility reinforces the classic paradox observed by feminist scholars: the symbolic empowerment of the divine feminine often coincides with the practical disempowerment of real women in public, economic, and ritual spheres (cf. Uma Chakravarti, Nivedita Menon).





# ECONOMICS OF FAITH: CHARGES, RISK, AND UNCERTAINTY

Every vendor, regardless of religion, gender, or commodity, was subject to daily stall charges, which varied between ₹500–₹1500 depending on location and size. These were collected by the puja committee, which effectively functions as a spatial regulator and economic gatekeeper.

**Raju Das, mobile accessory vendor:**

*“It’s going okay—nothing great. After paying the stall fee, transport, and food, there’s little left. But I come every year. It’s tradition.”*

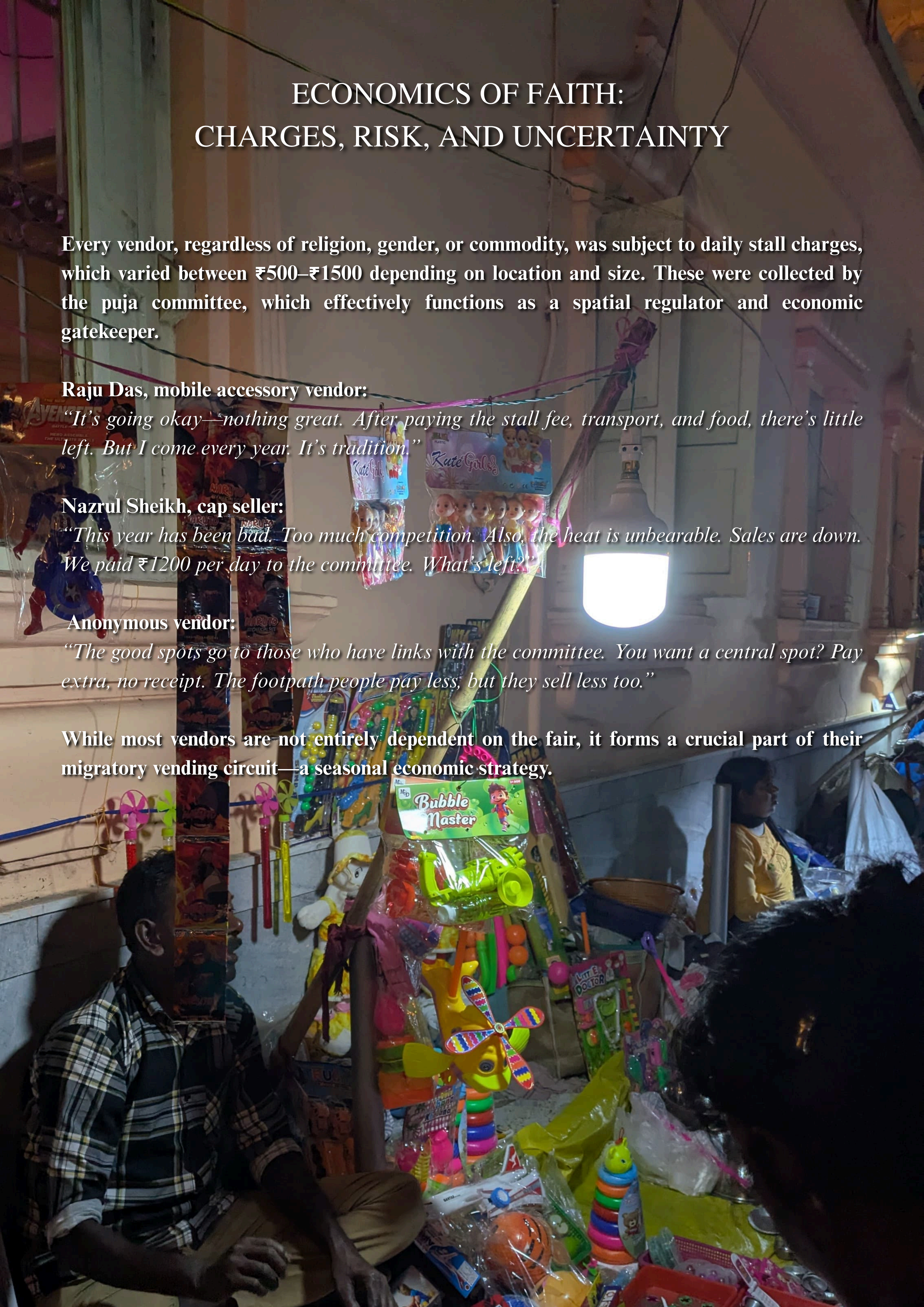
**Nazrul Sheikh, cap seller:**

*“This year has been bad. Too much competition. Also, the heat is unbearable. Sales are down. We paid ₹1200 per day to the committee. What’s left?”*

**Anonymous vendor:**

*“The good spots go to those who have links with the committee. You want a central spot? Pay extra, no receipt. The footpath people pay less, but they sell less too.”*

While most vendors are not entirely dependent on the fair, it forms a crucial part of their migratory vending circuit—a seasonal economic strategy.





# FOOD, LABOR, AND HEALTH

Food is a major part of the fair's sensory identity. Yet, it is also one of its least regulated zones. Young boys, often minors, man the stalls. Most food sold is deep-fried, synthetic, high in oil, and prepared under poor sanitary conditions.

**Sagar, 16-year-old boy cooking egg rolls:**

*"I work for my uncle. We make about ₹3000 a day, but costs are high. We don't refrigerate—just cook and sell. There's no inspection."*

**Elderly visitor:**

*"All this is junk food. But children love it. Still, no health checks. Even water is suspicious."*

The absence of female food vendors again reflects a gendered exclusion from high-revenue public culinary labor. Meanwhile, the invisibility of regulatory agencies reveals a systemic neglect of public health.

## PLAY AND JOY AMIDST STRUGGLE

While vendors struggled with expenses, the children of Chinsurah rejoiced. Colorful plastic toys, masks, and balloons dotted the landscape. This fleeting joy is ephemeral and innocent, layered over adult anxieties.

**Santu, 12-year-old boy:**

*"We saved for this all month. I bought a toy sword and a mask. I'll come again tomorrow."*

This juxtaposition of childhood wonder and adult economic stress marks the fair as a liminal space—a site of overlapping temporalities, dreams, and disappointments.





# Critical Analysis: Reading the Fair as a Cultural Text

## RITUAL AND CAPITAL: FOUCAULT IN THE FAIRGROUND

The Puja Committee's dual role as religious custodian and economic regulator reflects Foucauldian ideas of power, surveillance, and space regulation. Sacred space is commercialized, and access is monetized. This form of ritual capitalism dictates who gets to exist where, how long, and at what cost.

## GENDER, LABOR, AND SACRED IRONY

The goddess may slay the demon Mahishasura in religious imagination, but real-world women fight different battles—against patriarchal barriers, spatial exclusion, and economic precarity. The fair becomes a case study in how ritual reverence for the feminine divine does not translate into gender justice.

## SHARED ECONOMIES, FRAGILE HARMONIES

The presence of Hindu and Muslim vendors in mutual dependence is a powerful but fragile testament to secular livelihoods. Commerce binds what ideology may divide. Yet, this peace is not romantic—it is transactional, conditional, and shaped by shared risk.



# Conclusion

The Mahishamardini Tala Festival is more than a religious celebration. It is a microcosm of rural Bengal's intersections of faith, gender, commerce, and control. Vendors navigate between hope and loss, joy and despair, faith and fatigue. Women carve out micro-spaces in the margins. Children escape into fantasy. The festival thus becomes a palimpsest of performances—sacred and profane, empowered and silenced, visible and invisible.

Understanding this fair demands not just a look at the deity or the rituals, but an attention to the flickering bulbs of footpath stalls, the smell of reused oil, the ₹100 toy held tight by a child, and the silence of the woman sitting alone on the ground, selling bindis to strangers.







Voices FROM THE  
Periphery

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