

Street Food Vending in Guwahati: A Survival Strategy

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ABSTRACT Street foods are ubiquitous on urban streets. Like most informal sector activities food vending has been ignored by economic planners despite its importance in providing employment and cheap service. This paper incorporates results of the study of street food vending in Guwahati City by anthropological methods in terms of vendor status, clientele, etc. The findings reveal that vending is a source of sustenance for urban poor. Secondly, though termed as illegal, it generates revenue for municipalities. Finally, it provides a necessary service breaking societal barriers. This paper outlines measures for support and improvement of street food sector including legitimizing this activity.

An interest in the study of gastronomy has declined in the last two decades or so, yet my choice for this study stems from the need to focus not only on an important aspect of basic need but also on a section of people whose survival depends on it. This study deals with an ubiquitous activity, so obvious that it becomes almost invisible. It is the activity of street food vending.

Street food vending implies the activities related to the making and selling of ready-to-eat food on the streets. Such food encompasses all edibles, relishes, snacks, sweetmeat, fruits, beverages and meals that can be eaten without further processing. The vending of these items is done from pushcarts, baskets, carrying poles or stalls which have less than four permanent walls (Tinker, 1987a: 51). Street food vending serves two important functions. First, it is a source of employment for a large number of people who cannot otherwise be absorbed into the skilled, formal sector (FS) of the economy. Secondly, street food vendors perform the task of providing ready-to-eat food to a large cross-section of local people as also to those who come to the city.

The importance of street food in a city is undeniable. People who come to work or attend business in courts and offices, travelers or men who do not have families with them have to depend upon some kind of out-of-home devices for

their food. Traditionally, commensality between people of different castes and communities was restricted and eating of cooked food outside home was unacceptable. With progressive urbanization and industrialization, such restrictions have largely disappeared (Khare, 1976: 255). This has resulted in the change in culinary ethics and adoption of a new ethos. Different types of food which are secular and not confined to the domestic hearth (an area of high purity and sanctity) come to be accepted, leading to popularity of street foods and eating out practices.

STUDY AREA

The prevalence of street food has gone hand in hand with the growth of a cosmopolitan population. The city of Guwahati, which is the capital of Assam is located in the gateway to the entire northeastern region and is the premier city of this region. Located on a crescent-shaped foothill plain skirting the river Brahmaputra, the city extends from east to west for about 35 km. and its north-south extension is about 10.5 km.

The modern city of Guwahati (ancient Pragjyotishpur) has a rich historical background which is reflected in the past and present urbanization of the city. Ancient Guwahati was the flourishing capital of many dynasties from known period of history. After the British occupation of Assam in 1826, the pace of development of Guwahati became rapid. It became the head quarter of the British Commissioner of the Brahmaputra Valley. In 1965, Guwahati became a municipal town. After independence, Guwahati began to grow due to the establishment of major institutions of higher education, administrative offices and expansion of trade and commerce. Since then, economic and industrial activities in the city accelerated. Although the importance of Guwahati is mainly administrative, its physical location within the northeastern region as also of the country as a whole has led to a growth in

provide family life education for their children.

Findings from the small-scale survey gives the encouragement that parents are willing to participate in family life education if motivated. Religion, education, occupation, ethnic group, and age do not inhibit family life communication between parents and adolescents. Rather these factors have positive influence on home-based family life education. Education has a positive influence in the community under study where most parents have had the privilege of a minimum level of education. This shows that the schools not only have a direct role in providing family life education but are important in enhancing future parents' orientation to providing home-based family life education.

The result of the analysis shows that 30 per cent of the parents claimed that the reason why they have never discussed family life education with their adolescent children is lack of time. There is no doubt that parents' time at home in this area is limited. Parents need more time to enable them to provide family life education. About 28 per cent of the parents reported that the idea of family life education is a taboo and should lead to immoral behaviour. Effort is needed to overcome parents' reluctance which is based on their own perceived lack of knowledge. Their perception that discussion of some family life education topics may promote undesirable behavior by their adolescent children will need to be addressed.

One other highlight of this study is the positive role perception of parents and their expression of willingness to participate in any organised family life education programme. Thus the need to provide parental education that not only looks at family life education content but also enhances self-efficacy in disseminating that content to young people cannot be overemphasized. According to Barret (1979) and Harris et al (1983), the schools can serve the role of facilitator gathering information about parents' and adolescents' beliefs and knowledge and offering a setting where training sessions can be held that examine community beliefs and perceptions. Religious leaders should be reached through education programmes. The role of mothers in offering home-based family life education is clearly highlighted by this study. The knowledge of

mothers in family life issues should be improved upon through education programmes with social and religious women's groups in the community. For instance, we do not feel anything is wrong with organised workshop with women groups in religious and market groups. This workshop will be used to teach the parents how to communicate family life issues to their children. Such a workshop will remove any inhibitions parents should be encountering in communicating sexuality issues to their adolescents. Village groups should be mobilized also.

This study, though exploratory, has highlighted the need for a more detailed study on parental role and attitudes to adolescent sexual behaviour in a developing society like Nigeria. In such a study, questions bordering on perception, nature, extent and timing of parental communication with adolescent children will be framed. Concepts used in family life education have to be defined for easy understanding of the respondents. A more appropriate sample size and methodology will be utilized to collect such information. It will not be out of place to use qualitative techniques of data collection like focus group discussion and in-depth interviewing to further strengthen the quantitative data to be collected. In such a study also, it will be appropriate to interview a sample of adolescents. Findings of such a study will be used to design a social intervention programme to address the observed needs of the parents and hence enhance their capabilities in providing home-based family life communication to their children.

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have lived here for over two years, out of which 52.3 percent have completed 10 years of stay in the city as well as in this trade showing relative permanence. Only 19 percent are recent migrants yet to complete two years of stay. Seasonal migrants constitute 8.6 percent of the sellers. They have been coming regularly every year from the Bardhaman district of West Bengal and from Nowgaon district of Assam.

Street food vending is a permanent occupation for many vendors. Others practise this activity as a secondary and part-time occupation. Out of 360 vendors, 293 (81.4%) take up this activity as the primary occupation. Only 67 (18.6%) sell different types of food as a supplementary source of income. They are primarily agriculturist, mason, carpenter, wage labourer, fishermen, rickshawpullers, etc. As entry into the informal sector (IFS) and also into food vending is relatively easy requiring limited skills, no formal educational qualification and minimum of investment, it can be undertaken as a casual activity whenever the need arises.

Types of Vendors

The street food vendors in Guwahati can be categorized by the type of food sold – relish, snacks, light meals, meals, sweetmeat, fruits, etc. and nature of vending into stationary and mobile vendors. The stationary vendors are those who sell from a fixed locale throughout the day these vendors usually sell from a shop, stall or cart (wheels detached). They sell food like bun, biscuit, cake, cream roll, chops, *pakora* (fritters), omlette, boiled eggs, groundnuts, popcorn, roast corn, *pulao* (a rice dish), chowmein, *roti-sabji* (unleavened wheat bread with a vegetable preparation) and meals (vegetarian and non-vegetarian).

The mobile vendors are those that move about from place to place in search of customers. They are broadly of two types. The first move about in a definite route by making fixed rounds. They are seen in front of the school in the morning, then during recess and after school hours. In between they gravitate to the nearby cinema hall, market place or street corners. The second type has an area earmarked and within that specified area carries on vending activities without trespassing into each other's territories which are jeal-

ously guarded. They sell different items of relish such as *chanachur*, *jhalmuri*, *bhelpuri* (spicy mixtures of gram, puffed rice and dough respectively) etc. sweetmeats and slices of fruits, etc.

Streetfood Variety

As already mentioned, the vendors sell a stunning array of foods. The varieties of foods and their popularity reflect culture, custom and seasons. At least 55 types of food categorized as relishes snacks and light meals, sweetmeats, fruits and juices and meal are sold in the city. Each of these are addressed to a specific type of clientele depending upon ethnic background, religion, age, sex, economic condition, etc.

Location

Street food sellers logically vend in areas where people gather and have adequate demand for their products. In Guwahati, the highest concentration is seen in the commercial areas of Fancy Bazar, Paltan Bazar and Athgaon areas, which constitute the commercial hub of the city. Other fancied locations are near cinema halls, parks, government office, school, bus station, hospital, etc.

Customers

Largest customers are informal sector workers like rickshawpullers, carpenters, daily wage earners, small shopkeepers, truck drivers, daily commuters, etc. An estimate reveals that on an average, daily, at least 60 customers per enterprise, i.e. 21,600 people of different caste and religion eat street food breaking caste barriers. The highest numbers of customers is from Bihari, Marowari and Punjabi communities and are mainly males. Street food according to the customers is preferred because it is cheap, cooked right in front and served hot.

Street Vending and Survival

The vending outlets such as shops, stalls, carts, etc. are mostly run as one-man units. They account for 82 percent of the total enterprises. The rest includes 6 outlets run by married couples, 25 joint ventures between brothers and one three-member unit.

The source of labour in preparing, processing and selling is contributed by the family as

unpaid family assistance (73.4%). A large share is by the wife and unmarried daughters (55.4%). Hired workers (23%) both temporary and permanent are engaged in addition to family support. The paid employees are all males except one and include a fair number of boys (18).

Surrounding the street food trade are a number of satellite groups who depend on this business. The wholesale and retail suppliers of raw materials and some processed food such as biscuit, cake, etc. sellers of water to the stationary vendors for washing, cooking, drinking, etc. and a group of "middle men" who delivers street food to different locations, all manage to eke out an income.

The Trade

Capital is an essential requirement to start any business. Street food vendors like other workers in the informal sector do not generally keep written accounts of investment and income. However in depth interviews of the individual vendors reveal that initial capital invested in this activity varied from vendor to vendor. It depends upon several factors like type of food sold (relishes, sweetmeats, meals, etc.), nature of establishment (cart, box, tray, etc.) and economic condition of the vendors. A vendor within initial investment of only Rs.200 can have a beginning in this trade. On an enquiry regarding the source of initial capital it was seen that for 55.8 percent of vendors personal savings constitute the main source of starting capital, friends and relatives form the second source (35.8%). About 8 percent took loans from moneylenders at a high rate of interest (15% to 20% p.m.). Bank loans are however not popular primarily because of complicated paperwork and procedures and only one vendor in the study sample took loans from the bank.

Daily credit to buy raw materials and some processed food was common. However, vendors felt that their costs would be reduced if they could buy in bulk. But capital is a major problem for many vendors. Another limiting factor for investment and expansion of this trade is the close connection between home and work. Whenever emergency arises like illness of the vendor, his family members or to meet incidental expenses, there is a likelihood of using business money for personal needs. This is because alternative source of

money at low interest hardly exists as opposed to money for business.

Income

After estimating daily cost and observing daily sale, the average income of vendors is estimated to be Rs.50.00 per day (base year: 1991). This is higher than the government approved daily wage for labourers and equal to salary of many government jobs at entry level. The income is utilized primarily for feeding the family and on education of their children (55% of vendors regularly send home money). Vendors seldom express desire to expand their trade. Persistent harassment and tough measures adopted by the municipal authorities restrict expansion and investment. Vendors rarely set up permanent structures. The Gauhati Municipal Corporation by law (349 (1) a and b and 354 (1) b of GMC Act, 1969) prohibits erection of any structure on the roadside and requires bonafide land records regarding ownership of land, tax records, site plan, etc. There are however a few vendors (16) who have expanded. In most case expansion take an amoeba-like character with a family member, splitting off and replicating the enterprise in another location, otherwise expansion is by increasing inventory and space. Throughout the entire study there was only one vendor (a graduate) who moved from informal street vending to restaurant ownership.

Municipal Control and Streetfood Vending

Although the role of the IFS in providing employment opportunities to the poor is recognized, the hawkers and vendors engaged in this service are the objects of antagonism and are often harassed (Tinker, 1987b). The decision to enforce law against illegal structures on municipal or government lands, road widening or the spread of an epidemic disease brings stringent control upon all who sell ready-to-eat food. It is the strategy of the food sellers to move to "safer" places as soon as the news of eviction spreads but shops, stalls or carts stationed near the main roads are more effected than the mobile sellers.

Quality of food sold is another aspect that is looked after by the Gauhati Municipal Corporation but irregular inspection and bribery has led to slackness.

Licensing

The Gauhati Municipal Corporation (G.M.C.) tries to control Street food vending by requiring licenses for trading under section 180 (1) of the Gauhati Municipal Corporation Act, 1969 (Assam Act 1 of 1973). In Guwahati, a section (10.5%) of food sellers have licenses. These include mobile sellers of *chanacur*, *golgappa*, *bhelpuri*, sugarcane juice and a few pushcarts. The licenses are issued for the pushcarts as a slow moving vehicle and not for selling cooked food per se. The procedures for obtaining licences are complicated and the municipality does not readily grant license for this activity (In most countries selling food on the street is illegal). However a trade-permit is issued to those who apply. All vendors without such permit or license have to pay Rs.5.00 daily as encroachment fee. The collectors of G.M.C. issues money receipt against such collection, which is a good source of revenue for the Corporation and no government particularly in a

developing country can afford to do away with it or provide any alternative employment. This study thus urges upon the government to recognize and legitimize street food vending as a required urban amenity that provides genuine service and employment. It also calls for support through proper planning and credit facility so as to make street food vending healthy, convenient and desirable.

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