

Tracing the reasons for the growth of street food vending in kolkata

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Abstract: *Street vending is a debatable issue in the contemporary urban context. As part of the informal sector, street vending provides goods and services to the city population at affordable prices. However, it poses problems for systematic urban planning and is considered responsible for traffic congestion, occupancy of public spaces, overcrowding and, pollution. In Kolkata, street food is popular as a cultural endowment as well as its utilitarian aspect. This paper seeks to study the reasons behind the rise of street food vending in Kolkata. The paper explores the backdrop set up by the urbanity of Kolkata, the need for street food, the role of food vending and, the interactions of street vendors with different social circles such as consumers, local authorities and, their fellow vendors. To outline the reasons which have led to the increased demand for street food vendors forms the main objective of this paper.*

Keywords: *Street food, growth, urban landscape, Kolkata.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Kolkata is the third largest metropolitan city in India and is the focal point for many commercial pursuits in the Eastern part of India. The city has experienced the Information Revolution at a very fast pace, involving computerization of most activities and communication technologies. (Chaitanya & Sangal,2003) The domain includes IT software and related services. (Chattopadhyay, 2016) Kolkata has an expanding Information Technology (IT) sector including various companies and businesses where people from around the country come to work, contributing to the growing population of the city. IT parks are being developed where multiple companies are allotted spaces and can operate from the same building. ‘Technopolis’ in Salt Lake area is Kolkata’s first green information technology building, which is a step towards sustainability through the use of energy-saving techniques and the conservation of resources. (PTI, 2006) The expanding IT sector and other offices imply the requirement of skilled professionals as employees. The workforce in this sector consists of both residents and individuals who migrate from other states to work. The latter are usually part of the educated youth and middle-aged population who move out of their hometown in search of better educational and employment opportunities to bigger cities such as Kolkata. Employees working in the IT sector often have long working hours characterized by tight work schedules and fixed breaks. Working hours start as early as nine ‘o’clock in the morning. Areas of the city which have a high concentration of office buildings are called *office paras* or office localities and can consist of both government and private offices. BBD Bag, New Town, Rajarhat and, Sector 5 of Salt Lake in Kolkata are examples of such office paras. *Office para* is a colloquial Bengali term used to denote a busy locality marked by a predominance of commercial buildings and offices or an office locality (Law Insider). A key characteristic of office *paras* is the bustling market that develops like a border around these commercial structures, including food, beverages, newspapers and, magazines among others. While BBD Bag forms a core area of the city, New Town and Salt Lake owe their existence to more recent times. BBD Bag has existed since pre-independence and houses many structures of public importance such as the General Post Office, the Writers Building, the High Court of Kolkata and, the Indian Museum. The workforce of all these buildings commute to this location on a daily basis. Gitanjali Park in New Town has Tata Consultancy Services and the Ecospace Business Park while Salt Lake houses the offices for many private companies such as Cognizant, Verolt Engineering and, IBM among many others.

Office paras are also known for their variety of street food. Street food is both a significant marker of culture and at the same time, performs a functional role of providing food to people daily at affordable prices. Illustrative of another dimension, street vending is an issue under constant scrutiny in the urban landscape due to problems relating to health and sanitation and those related to urban planning. In the backdrop of globalization and the rise of the IT sector in Kolkata, the research question for this paper is as follows: What are the causes for the rise of street food vending in Kolkata in the current scenario? In addition, their inter-relationship with other sections of the population and the approaches in society towards street vending form the second part of this research study.

2. OBJECTIVES:

- The key objective of this research paper is to trace the reasons behind the growth of street food vending in Kolkata, especially in and around the office localities.
- To understand street food vendors as part of the informal sector and briefly outline the nature of interactions with the consumers, civic authorities and, fellow vendors.

3. METHODOLOGY:

The study is exploratory and qualitative in nature. This research paper and the insights encompassed within it are based largely on the data collected by the researcher during fieldwork for their doctoral research topic based on entrepreneurship among the street food vendors of Kolkata. In-depth interviews have been conducted with street food vendors in Kolkata and their experiential accounts of starting and running the food business. The history of street vending in Kolkata and its changing nature with subsequent changes in the landscape of the city is also significant in this regard. Newspaper reports and literature on street vending in India have helped to support the arguments made in this paper. The research study outlines the causes of an increase in street food vending from two standpoints- the first one from the perspective of the changed urbanity of Kolkata with increase in offices, especially in the IT sector which has led to increased demand for food and related amenities in these areas. Secondly, from the standpoint of the street vendors, vending being a viable form of employment for many unskilled and semi-skilled individuals migrating to the city in search for a better quality of life and overall standard of living.

4. DISCUSSION:

Office paras often occupy a central location in the city and people commute daily from their temporary or permanent residence to their place of work. Every day during lunch hours, these hubs witness employees leaving their offices for their meals along with other instances for short breaks for snacks and beverages. Employees often do not have the time to prepare meals on a daily basis and thus, consume lunch outside of the home. This pattern has undergone changes since 2020, when the pandemic caused a lot of companies to introduce and encourage ‘work-from-home’ and remote working which does not require employees to be physically present at the workplace. Instead, they can work from their home. However, most workplaces have resumed work in the office space which requires employees to be physically present at the workplace. There may also be a gendered dimension to the consumption of food in the public space. The participation of women in the formal labour market has increased. Both men and women go out to work, which makes it difficult for women to cook in the house everyday. Women currently constitute over thirty-five per cent of the IT workforce in India. (ET Online, 2023) The nuclear family functions smoothly through the dual income of both spouses. The place of work has thus become an important site for the consumption of food. The idea of ‘sit-down meals’ three times a day with the family has almost disappeared. Since workplaces are away from home and family members spend a lot of time away from home, it decreases the time available for meal preparation at home. (Katz and Weaver, 2003) Employees who bring packed lunches to their workplace also purchase snacks and beverages from street vendors. Apart from the aspect of consumption, street food provides a break from work, in addition to providing a space for interactions between co-workers and bonding over a cup of tea.

To deal with this demand for food and beverages, *office paras* in Kolkata have witnessed a sharp increase in the number of street food vendors. These areas serve as a natural market¹ for street vendors. The development of street food markets

¹ Natural markets are areas where there is propensity for a market to develop due to the nature of demand for goods and services in that area. These markets are largely informal in nature and viewed by civic authorities as congested and chaotic in nature. (Mehta and Gohil, 2013)

in office paras are examples of natural markets. Lunch is the most common meal that is consumed at the vending stalls. Many of these vendors serve meals similar to home-cooked food, with dishes including rice, dal, vegetable curries and, meat-based curries. Many also sell tea and coffee, which are popular beverages among office-going people throughout the day. The main customer group for these vendors are constituted by employees of the private or government offices. Both blue-collar staff and white-collar employees along with other individuals who work outside of the home purchase meals from these food businesses. Street vendors thus, fulfill food requirements, both in terms of snacks and refreshments as well as daily meal requirements for the section of population that ply in these office paras on a regular basis. The infrastructural development in these areas also occurs at a very fast pace, with the prevalence of construction and maintenance work. Thus, street vendors also cater to the daily wage workers in these areas. *Office paras* are also known for their variety and scale of street food. Apart from the employees of surrounding workplaces, individuals comprising of both locals and tourists also visit these hubs of street food to explore, hog on the food and more recently, to collect photo and video documentation for social media.

Migrations from predominantly rural to urban areas take place due to the pull factors of cities such as greater job opportunities and aspirations for a better standard of living. The number of people migrating to Kolkata has been increasing at a steady rate. Many of them lack the educational qualifications and specialized skill sets which are required for obtaining a job in the formal sector. This leads them to then find employment in the informal sector which often employs unskilled and semi-skilled individuals. (Bhowmik, 2003) Many among this group may also be educated. However, due to the limited capacity of formal sector jobs, they are underemployed or unemployed. In addition, the social and cultural capital of an individual plays a vital role in hiring preferences. (Upadhyaya, 2007) Street vending presents itself as a viable employment opportunity due to low cost of setting up a business wherein individuals start the business with nominal capital amounts. In addition, vending is not dependent upon the dynamics of employment processes and is a form of self-employment and entrepreneurship. The idea of financial independence among women is also being promoted by the state. The government is encouraging women to start their own businesses. Cooking is a skill that is imparted to most women at a very young age due to a gendered division of labour in families. This skill can be utilized in businesses involving cooking and preparation of food. The state also encourages food businesses run by women in the form of self-help groups (SHGS), the members of which are given opportunities to sell their products in fairs organized by the government.

Migrations to Kolkata take place from the neighbouring rural areas and states such as Bihar, Jharkhand and, Odisha with fifty per cent of migrants belonging to the state of Bihar. (Sen, 2019) Although street vendors form a part of the informal economy, they are self-employed and start their businesses from scratch. They can be understood as small entrepreneurs selling food, garments, flowers and, household utilities. (Dalwadi, 2010) Food vending is popular since it constitutes a basic need for all individuals and there is a daily requirement for food. They engage in the sale of both processed food comprising of cooked ready-to-eat food such as meals, snacks and, beverages and unprocessed food such as fruits and vegetables. Office paras however, are characterized by the predominance of processed food due to the nature of the consumer group.

Food is also an important element of material culture which renders the cultural dimension of food vending equally important to its functional aspect in Kolkata as an urban centre. Continued migration of people from other cultures along with the impact of globalization has introduced new types of foods and dishes in Kolkata. Illustrative of this pattern, *litti chokha* and fusion foods have become popular and are sold in areas such as BBD Bag and Gitanjali Park. This has also caused changes in the nature of food available in office paras, with the latter serving a variety of food choices.

Marking a new trend in the domain of street vending, a few individuals with a strong educational background and relatively better socio-economic capital are emerging as street food vendors. This section has realized the potential of street vending as a mode of entrepreneurship and thus, has started to invest in the domain. It has also served as a contingency plan for some during periods of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. They are better acquainted with the prospects of social media and harness its benefits to promote their businesses. This section presents deviance from the normative idea that only individuals from weaker socio-economic backgrounds engage in street vending. Thus, it creates a 'shock value' and leads to many street vendors of this kind to gain popularity, especially through social media platforms.

Vendors as part of the informal sector lack the kind of job security, work benefits and safeguards that characterize formal jobs. Street vendors often adopt the approach of ‘quiet encroachment’² wherein they create their space on the street by continually being present and conducting business from the same location. They may also enter into negotiations with the location authorities in the form of daily payments in order to continue vending in that location. Such negotiations are also required since street vendors are considered illegal occupants of public spaces. Street vendors as a collective have and wield more power in areas where they are high in number and have existed for a long period of time. They co-exist with the local authorities and become a part of the area’s landscape.

The element of competition among street food vendors is largely absent. They recognize each other as individuals trying to earn their living and empathize with them. They also try to help each other by providing storage facilities from one’s own stall or temporarily managing the stall for a fellow vendor while the latter is away. Food vendors have however, been found to have a negative impression about cafes and restaurants due to their high prices. According to street food vendors, they serve the same quality of food as any formal restaurant but people tend to choose the latter because of their ambiance, amenities and, maintenance. They are also critical of the high prices of food items sold by high-end permanent restaurants.

Vending set-ups of street food are starkly different than that of their formal counterparts consisting of permanent cafes, restaurants and, eateries. The street vending process incorporates taking orders, cooking, serving and, consumption in the same space and the interactions are face-to-face interactions marked by informality. Street vendors located in office paras often experience the same consumer group with slight variations. Since the motive is to provide daily food requirements, the focus is not on the dining and culinary experience that people enjoy in restaurants.

5. CONCLUSION:

To conclude, there is a growth in the IT sector and other offices which implies that meals are often consumed outside the home, in the public space. Because of this demand, many street vendors choose office paras as their vending location. On the other hand, the urban poor need a livelihood but cannot find employment in the formal sector, a situation wherein self-employment becomes a viable option.

Street vending as part of the informal sector stands on a blurred line between legality and illegality. While Article 19(1) confers the livelihood to all citizens of the country (Prakasam, 2022), street vending can be a menace to urban society if left unregulated. While BBD Bag falls under the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC), Salt Lake and New Town are controlled by the Bidhannagar Municipal Corporation (BMC). There have been a number of attempts to regulate street vending through eviction drives and relocation of street vendors. Such actions by civic authorities are most common among garment sellers, that is, street vendors selling clothes. Recent eviction drives have been conducted in areas such as New Market and Sealdah. Realizing the indispensable role of food vendors in urban cities, the state has come up with national and state-level legislations which seek to regulate street vending instead of abolishing it. The central legislation, Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act came about in 2014, the state implementation of which is the 2018 West Bengal Urban Street Vendors Rules (2018). The jurisdiction of these legislations includes the organization of Town Vending Committees with representation for street vendors, the registration of vendors and, the distribution of vending certificates. (GOI,2014) There is also an ongoing attempt towards the establishment of demarcated vending zones throughout the city. These attempts indicate an acceptance of street vending as part of the city.

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² Bayat Asef (2000) proposed the term ‘quiet encroachment’ to understand how the subaltern sections of society make attempts towards inclusivity through survival strategies and by carrying out an everyday struggle for resources, services and properties monopolized by the elite.

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