CHAPTER SIX
The street food trade in Guwahati is primarily an activity carried out by the rural migrants who come to the city in order to eke out an income for survival. Although Assam does not have a tradition of street food, it has proliferated like the other informal sector activities. Earlier, cooking and serving of food were the tasks traditionally carried out by the womenfolk of the household, while men worked outside the house to earn their livelihood in non-domestic activities. The processes associated with cooking of food were confined to the domestic hearth. As soon as this activity began to have an economic relevance, as a source of income, men took it upon themselves to earn their livelihood through this pursuit. The kitchen which was earlier confined to the house became a part of the street and
along with it the hearth "encounters a socio-cultural heterogeneity" (Khare 1976:12). It is increased further with changes in education, occupation, migration and the emergence of a secular society and its norms at large (ibid.).

THE ENTERPRISE

Street food vending is a part and parcel of city life in Guwahati. The enterprises\(^1\) are mostly run as one-man unit. They account for 82 per cent of the total vending outlets in the city. The rest includes six enterprises run by married couples, twenty five joint ventures between brothers and one three member enterprise between two brothers and a friend.

There are some vendors who engage or employ additional labour from various sources. Table 13 shows the kind of additional workers used in the trade.

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\(^1\) An enterprise may be defined as an undertaking engaged in production and/or distribution of goods and/or services not for the sole purpose of own consumption. The workers in an enterprise may consist of members of the household or hired workers or both. The activities of the enterprise may be carried out at one or more than one distinct locations. The activities of the enterprise may also be carried on only for a part of the year but on a fairly regular basis. It can be owned or operated by a single household or by several households jointly (on a partnership basis) or by an institutional body. (Source: Enterprise List, Census of India, 1991).
TABLE 13: TYPES OF ADDITIONAL WORKERS USED IN STREET FOOD TRADE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of worker</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>T</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family workers</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>18.01</td>
<td>55.40</td>
<td>73.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10)*</td>
<td></td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hired worker</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>22.07</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>22.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(18)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others**</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>44.14</td>
<td>55.85</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Figures in parentheses indicate minor workers.
** This category includes friends or casual workers who do not get wages.

Table 13 indicates that family sources including the wife, unmarried children and brothers help in a majority of cases. The vendors whose families do not reside in Guwahati take the help of unmarried brothers, friends, etc. Hired help is engaged by vendors in addition to family help. These workers may be employed temporarily on a daily wage basis or on a permanent one with monthly salary. These hired workers are mostly men (49) and include a fair number of boys (18) (Plate 27).

Babul Shah (42) is a Bihari immigrant from Sarsopahi area of Madhubani district of Bihar. He has been selling *puri*, *ghugni*, chop and bread *pakora* from a roadside cart near the Dispur capital complex for the past ten years. Since last four years, he has been selling regularly on festive occasions like Rongali Bihu and Durga Puja. During these festivals,
he pushes his cart (he has a license for slow moving vehicle, hence by law permitted to be mobile) to a convenient location near the festival site. Besides vending in the usual food items, Babul prepares pakora, khurma and coconut laddu.

Last year (1991) he hired two boys (aged 19 and 12 years) during Durga Puja to help him in serving, washing utensils and carrying water. Babul said that he could engage the boys because sale was three times more during these days. He paid the older boy Rs. 40.00 and the younger one Rs. 20.00 per day for four days.

There are many vendors who employ additional labour during festivals (Bihu and Puja), fairs (Guwahati Book Fair) and exhibitions (Craft Bazar, Handloom exhibitions) etc. (Plate 28). After they are over, such extra labourers are removed. But home help remains by and large a constant source of labour for the vendors. The division of labour within the household, with regard to buying, processing and cooking the food to be sold is largely a family affair.

Rathin (29) is a seller of roti, ghugni, dal and tarkari near the Dispur capital complex. He lives along with his wife, Runu in Sarumataria about 1 km. from the place of sale. They have been married for two years and together prepare the food to be sold. Rathin does the shopping for all the raw materials necessary in the process of preparing the
food like flour, chick peas, potatoes, *dal*, seasonal vegetables, spices, etc. Once a week he buys these ingredients. Every night it is Runu’s duty to soak the chick peas. In the early morning, she prepares the *ghugni* and the *dal* while Rathin cuts and washes the vegetables for the *tarkari*. He then arranges the food to be taken to the place of sale. At about 8 a.m., after eating a light meal, he transports these items on a rickshaw and leaves for his pushcart (stationary).

Here, the first thing he does is to clean the place. Then he brings water from the nearby tap and stores it in tin drums to be used the entire day. Thereafter he starts kneading the dough for the *roti* and starts cooking the vegetables to be ready by 9 a.m. when the customers start coming. They come for various works in the secretariat and other offices in the capital complex.

Rathin has no help in the cart. He serves and washes the plates himself. Sometimes in the afternoon, Runu joins him and help by washing the utensils and also by serving. But with regard to cooking in the place of sale, Rathin does it entirely.

Home help is used in processing and preparing street food. Members of the vendor’s family, particularly the wife, help at home by cleaning and cooking the food to be sold. Usually, a vendor’s wife does not go to the vending spot except when the need for assistance arises.
Gauranga Paul (48) is a Bengali seller hailing from the state of West Bengal. He is married and lives in a rented room in Maligaon area of the city. He is engaged in selling puri, ghugni and chat in Maligaon where the headquarter of N.F. Railway is situated. In addition, he sells in the book fair held in the Judge’s field every year. For the past three years he has been selling puri, ghugni, chat in the fair site. On the night before the opening day, he places his cart in a convenient location near the entrance of the fair. His cart is brightly painted and gaily decorated with flower garlands. The cart is provided with a roof and kept open on all sides. On one side of the cart are the puffed puris neatly stacked one over the other which is prepared on the spot with the help of kerosene pressure stoves. The chat is decorated with a salad and placed on a tray over a lighted stove. Besides these, the cart also contains space for a saucepan (containing ghugni) and another stove which is used for making tea.

This year, as the visitors to the fair increased, Paul found it difficult to cope even with two additional helpers (aged 12 and 14 years) who were mostly used for washing the utensils and carrying water from the tap at a distance of about 50 ft. On the fourth day of the ten day fair he asked his wife Ruma to join him. Normally, she does not visit the establishment but because of increased demand she came and helped her husband by preparing tea and collecting money. At home, she helps her husband by cutting, cleaning, soaking and cooking the different ingredients necessary for preparing next day’s food.
Hari Prasad Mondal, aged 45 years, is a cultivator from Bebejia near Nowgong in Assam. He grows mainly a crop of jute and some groundnuts. He supplements his income by resorting to groundnut selling in Guwahati during the agriculturally lean season. Hari Prasad said that his wife, Kunjabala, in addition to her domestic chores helps him by cleaning and drying the groundnuts and also by packing the sacks to be transported to Guwahati.

Level of investment

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 have revealed that levels of investment varied from vendor to vendor. It depends upon several factors like the type of food sold, nature of establishment and economic condition of the vendor.

Bani Saha (36) is a Bengali widow with two children. She hails from a village in Dhubri district of Assam about 290 kms. west of Guwahati. She came to Guwahati ten years ago after her marriage to Raju Saha, a steel trunk maker. Seven years after their marriage, Raju died leaving Bani with very little money and two small children. Burdened with past debts and no work, she was desperate to find some means of sustenance. After a few futile attempts she decided to start a small tea
stall just outside her house. She lives in Panbazar-Ranibari area in a small two-roomed rented house. It is a commercial area comprising of several pharmaceutical firms as well as shops dealing in books, stationeries, watches, etc. From a few street food vendors in the area she found out how with the minimum of investment she could start a business of her own. She got a loan of Rs. 250.00 from her landlord (who was also kind enough to waive a portion of her house rent till she could establish herself) with which she bought tea leaves (1 kg.), milk powder (1 kg.), sugar (1 kg.), kerosene (5 litres) and a stove total expenditure of which was Rs. 200.00. She also bought bun (2 doz.), biscuit (3 doz.) and cake (1 doz.) on credit\(^2\). Thus with a very nominal expense of approximately Rs. 200.00, Bani started vending in a very humble manner.

Sailen Das (27) hails from Rangia (52 kms. north of Guwahati) in Kamrup district. He used to sell flowers in Guwahati. Now he sells chowmein, pulao, ghugni/choley-bhatura and tea from a push cart located near the Latasil playground.

Initially he started by selling from a small table (only for a month), but later on he bought a new cart for Rs. 1200.00. It is glass covered on three sides. He also bought two kerosene pressure stoves, stainless steel plates and glasses, cast iron cooking receptacles and two wooden benches. He also provided a plastic sheet over the sitting area (very close to the wall of the Latasil play ground) for shade and protection from rain. All these had cost him (in

\(^2\) Credit is usually given for one day (daily credit), but in this case she was offered a week’s credit on sympathy ground.
1991) about Rs. 3000.00. In addition, buying of raw materials involves added expenditure of approximately Rs. 300.00 daily. All these expenses were possible partly from his personal savings and partly from a loan of Rs. 1,500.00 from two flower sellers.

**Initial capital**

Capital is an essential requirement to start any business. The street food vendors were asked where the initial capital came from to invest in the business. Table 14 gives the sources of initial capital used by street food vendors in Guwahati.

**TABLE 14 : SOURCES OF INITIAL CAPITAL OF THE VENDORS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Vendors No.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal savings</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>55.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family source</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>20.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money lender</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>15.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bank</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14 shows that personal savings is the highest source of initial capital. Close relatives contribute about 20.28 per cent followed by friends who offered interest-free loans to 15.56 per cent of enterprises. Money lenders form another important source (8.06%) of
starting capital. Loans from banks are not popular. Except for one, who received bank loan, there are two Assamese and one Bihari vendors who sought bank loans to buy pushcarts and to start business. But because of complicated paper work and procedures of banks, they had to approach Bihari money lenders who offered the money at a very high rate of interest.

Daily credit on a particular day was also common (48.32%). However, many vendors felt that their costs would be reduced if they could buy in greater quantities, but capital is a major problem for many vendors.

Raju Das (29), son of an Assamese daily wage labourer, sells paratha, ghugni, pulao and chowmein near a cinema hall in Maligaon. He is married with a new born baby and lives in a rented room in Maligaon railway colony. He hired a pushcart (but vends from a fixed location) from a Bihari person at a monthly rent of Rs. 400.00.

He gets good clientele consisting of cinema-goers and other casual marketers. On an average in a day, he manages to make a profit of approximately Rs. 100. But there are several expenses like house rent (Rs. 150 p.m.), hiring charges of the cart (Rs. 400 p.m.), encroachment fee of Rs. 5 to be paid to the municipality every day and food and other expenditure. This makes bulk buying of the raw materials (to prepare food) very difficult.
In street food trading, business and personal finance are inseparable because of the close connection between home and work. Thus whenever emergency arises like illness of the vendor, his family members or to meet incidental expenses or social commitments, 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. This tendency of small entrepreneurs to mix personal and business money is seen as a limiting factor for further investment and expansion by the development economists.

Ram Khelam Shah (59) is a seller of tea, bun, biscuit and chat from a roadside stall consisting of a wooden bed. His stall is located near the Kamakhya funeral ground in Bhutnath. He lives along with his wife (50) just behind the stall in a one roomed house. Shah, despite his small investment (less than Rs. 500) makes good business. His stall caters to all the nearby shops like cycle repair shop, motor garage, rickshaw and thela pullers, woodcutters and people coming to the funeral ground. Despite all these, he has not been able to increase his inventory of food. Money is the biggest problem for him. His wife who is ailing needs medical attention from time to time. So whatever little profit he gets from the vending outlet goes for medical expenses and little is left for reinvestment.
Bipin Deka, aged 40 years, hails from Nalbari district of Assam. He is married and has three children. They all live in a rented house in Beltola area. Bipin used to sell tea, bun, cake, biscuit, etc. in a stall near the Wireless bus stop in the same area. Two months back his father died. Being the only son, it was customary to fulfill all the ritual and social obligations associated with the mortuary ceremony which is very expensive. On completion of the death rituals, he along with his family returned to Guwahati to find that his temporary shed was demolished by the Guwahati Municipal Authorities. After they dismantled his shop, he could not rebuild it for about a month. By that time, whatever little savings he had was exhausted. He looked around for a small loan to build a shed. After a long search, his brother-in-law gave him a loan of Rs. 300.00 only. Since this money was not sufficient, a friend of his advised him to meet a person who would be helpful. Bipin met the person who is the owner of several rickshaws and pushcarts and received Rs. 1,000.00 with an interest of 5 per cent per month. He built the stall in the same location and started work. As business picked up and old customers started coming, he was able to regain his earlier position.

Income and its uses

After estimating daily cost and observing sale, it is possible to divide the enterprises into three income groups: low income group (LIG) with a daily income of less than Rs. 40.00, middle income group (MIG) between Rs. 40.00 to Rs. 80.00 per day and high income group
(HIG) having a daily income of above Rs. 80.00. Using this criteria, the street food enterprises of Guwahati have been divided accordingly as shown in Fig. 8.

Of the total number of enterprises, 173 (52.90%) belong to the lower income group, followed by 124 (37.92%) in the middle and 30 (9.2%) in the high income group respectively (Table 15). The average daily income is Rs. 50.00. This income is more than that of a daily wage labourer. However, income depends upon several factors, some of which are location, type of food, seasonality, etc.

(i) Location: The location of street food sellers is important. Vendors tend to gravitate wherever the customers are concentrated. Prime locations are courts, hospitals, government offices and establishments, cinema halls, market places, main roads, etc.

(ii) Food type: In addition to location, food type sold is also an important factor contributing to income of street food vendors. A vendor must assess the demand for a particular food in a locality. For instance, Sita Ram is a chana vendor in Guwahati. He prefers to sell near schools, park, cinema halls and in market places because people who go to these places have very little time and chana can be had
FIG. 8. DISTRIBUTION OF STREET FOOD VENDING ENTERPRISES ACCORDING TO INCOME GROUP
**TABLE 15: DISTRIBUTION OF STREET FOOD VENDING ENTERPRISES ACCORDING TO INCOME GROUP**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income group</th>
<th>enterprises</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower income group</td>
<td></td>
<td>173</td>
<td>52.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(LIG, Less than Rs. 40.00 per day)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle income group</td>
<td></td>
<td>124</td>
<td>37.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(MIG, Between Rs. 40.00 to Rs. 80.00 per day)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher income group</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(HIG, More than Rs. 80.00 per day)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>327</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


standing. Moreover, this relish by its very sight can cause demand. By observing the customers of this vendor in a day (total: 118 customers), it was found that chana is eaten primarily by the Bihari (78), Marwari (28), Assamese (8), Punjabi (3) and Bengali (1) communities. Secondly, more than half the customers are children (53%). The approximate sale in a day is about Rs. 100.00 leaving a net income of Rs. 30.00. The minimum price of one helping is Rs. 0.50.

The case of two vendors cited below will show how the choice of food in a particular location help to increase income.

Dipak (23) and Ramesh (36) hail from Belsor, a village about 70 kms west of Guwahati. Together they started by selling juice of tender coconut\(^3\) in front of the Deputy Commissioner’s court in the city. After a year they gave up because they were not earning enough probably due to the presence of a large number of sellers of tender coconut in the same location.

They decided to start a street side eaterie on a pushcart near the same site. With the help of a loan of Rs. 1000.00 partly from a friend and Dipak’s sister’s husband, they bought two pairs of benches, some utensils and two kerosene pressure stoves.

Ramesh had past experience of working in a canteen as a waiter and kitchen hand. He cooks meals consisting of rice, dal and vegetable curry;

\(^3\)The tender coconut has a great demand during the hot season for its refreshing juice.
roti, omelette and prepares snacks like bread pakora, malpua, etc. Dipak prepares tea and serves food to the customers.

They make brisk business on weekdays from 8 a.m. till about 6 p.m. when they get numerous customers. These people are employees of nearby offices and people coming from outside Guwahati for different kinds of business in these offices.

A cup of tea and a minimum snack costs Rs. 3.00, while a simple meal costs between Rs. 5.00 to Rs. 10.00. Their daily sale from this eaterie leaves them with an income of Rs. 100.00 to Rs. 150.00 per day.

(iii) Seasonality: In Guwahati, street food vending during the rainy season (summer) is erratic. Many snacks and relishes which are vended and eaten on the street by standing are largely affected. In winter, despite shorter days, vending is good and income made in this season is better than summer. Also the food type varies along with the change in season.

Religion and festive occasions, including fairs attract a large number of vendors. Durga puja, Idd, Rongali Bihu and fairs associated with Shivratri, ambubashi and Chaut puja attract and raise demand for street food. Conversely, religion may also restrict the sale of street food. In the Islamic month of Ramadan, many Muslim people
keep fast. Also, in the month of *Chaut* (March - April), when many Marwari and Bihari people fast, sale of street food declines.

During the busy period of planting and harvesting, vendors who have agricultural land in their natal homes leave the city for a period to come back again. This also affects sale.

**Expansion of trade**

Expansion of street food trade is an indication of its viability. While most (88%) of the vendors in Guwahati would have liked some credit to improve inventories, very few vendors seemed eager to expand. There are many difficulties as voiced by several vendors in the expansion of the trade. These are hiring additional employees, meeting a payroll, finding larger place in which to make or sell street food and the ‘risk’ of operating without a license. In addition, the vendors fear that municipal regulations might be more strict on the slightly larger enterprises.

It is often seen that vendors do not invest in permanent structures. This is primarily because of the existing municipal rules - 349(1)a and b and 354(1)b of the Guwahati Municipal Corporation Act, 1969, which prohibit erection of any structure on the roadside. Moreover, such erection requires prior permission of the engineer of the ward and Commissioner of the corporation. In order to obtain
permission, a vendor must provide bonafide land records regarding ownership of land, payment of taxes, site plan, etc.

Instead of expanding the existing trade, vendors by and large prefer to invest in other directions. Interviews of street food vendors in Guwahati have revealed that 55 per cent of vendors regularly send home money to their families who live in their natal villages. The profit derived from street food vending is thus utilized in other directions. One of the main uses is for the maintenance of the family. Then comes education of children.

There are however a few vendors (16) who have expanded their enterprises. Enterprises with sufficient income tend to expand either laterally or hierarchically (Tinker 1987a:68). Lateral expansion is based on an amoeba model - one of replication. In most cases, lateral expansion is treated like a new enterprise run by another family member.

Upendra Pathak (43) is a phuska seller in the busy Fancy bazar area of the city. He left his native village Manichowk in the Sitamarhi district of Bihar some 20 years ago. At first, he went to Calcutta looking for a job. While in Calcutta, he picked up the skill of preparing phuska. He sold for 13 years in Calcutta after which he had to leave the place because young boys used to come and demand money from him often and trouble him. One day while he was visiting his native village, he met a muri laddu seller (of the same village) and informed him
about Assam and about the immense scope of street food vending in Guwahati. Along with this friend, Upendra came to Guwahati and started making and selling *phuska* in the Lakhtokia area. Later he shifted to a better location near Shani Mandir area of Fancy Bazar. After seeing the business prospects here, few years later, he brought his two brothers to Guwahati to join him and help him in this trade. None of them knew earlier how to prepare *phuska* or any other street food. But they learnt it from Upendra and operated as individual vendors by selling in separate locations. They all live together in a rented house in Athgaon and prepare the snack together.

Expansion of street food trade can also take place along a hierarchical model of a pyramid. This expansion involves a vertical upgradation of the trade, from a simple level to a higher level. It may be by increasing inventory of food and by occupying more area.

Naba Bora (35) hails from a village in Nowgong district of Assam. He was working in a pharmaceutical company in Guwahati for 3 years, after which he had to leave the company due to a misunderstanding with the employer. He did not go back to his village, instead he took to selling tea, bun, biscuit and cake from a box in a street corner in Panbazar. Later he shifted to a bigger place (present site) in Panbazar. He bought a pushcart and remodelled it (Plate 29). He also erected temporary covers for the convenience of customers. In this present site he sells tea, chowmein, *choley-bhatura* and rolls which are prepared from a gas and two
kerosene pressure stoves. He has managed to employ 3 persons who help him in cooking and serving.

He has a number of steady customers including office workers, college students and nearby shopkeepers. He admits that this trade is very profitable and one can expand but space and municipal regulations are the major problems. Some day he hopes to own a restaurant and buy a truck which would help him in expanding his business.

Vertical expansion of street food trade may also involve such expansion leading to a complete changeover from street food vending to ownership of restaurant. During the period of this study, the present investigator found only one vendor (graduate) who moved from food vending to restaurant ownership.

WOMEN IN STREET FOOD TRADE

Street food vending in Guwahati is dominated by men and women vendors comprise only 3.9 per cent of the total sample. In a country like India, which is predominantly patriarchal, men acts as the head of the intact family. While the divorced, widowed or single women are controlled and protected by the male relatives. But in the context of this study, it is seen that with the rise of women-headed households, women’s economic prowess has increased.
Dhannada Das (29) is an unmarried Assamese woman hailing from a village 70 kms north west of Guwahati. She is the third child in a family consisting of a widowed mother, two elder brothers who are married and two younger sisters who are studying. Dhannada is a matriculate and could have got a job in a government office, but after several attempts she had to forego the idea. Instead, she wanted to do something on her own. She used to come everyday by bus to Guwahati to sell hand woven *gamocha* and *chaddar* and return home in the evening. This proved to be strenuous and unprofitable. Meanwhile her mother was seriously ill and required constant attention. Her brothers refused to look after their mother. So the responsibility was entirely upon Dhannada.

They had very little agricultural land which was divided among the two brothers. So, Dhannada decided to come to Guwahati and with the assistance of her uncle (a distant kin who is also from the same village) started a small vending stall adjoining the main bus stop near Judge’s field. She sells tea, bun, biscuit, cake and *tambul-pan*. After a few months, when her business started picking up, she brought her mother to Guwahati but left her sisters with relatives in the village. Both of them lives in a small room in the Uzanbazar area of the city.

Besides fending for her mother and herself, Dhannada sends home money for the education and other expenses of her sisters.

Women’s income is essential. It not only supplements the family’s income but also gives her a sense of independence vital to her self respect and her position in the family. Though women vendors in
Guwahati constitute a very small segment, the income derived by them are important for household economy. Out of fourteen vendors, six are the sole supporters of their family. They include five single women and one married woman whose husband is a drunkard with no income of his own. There are six vendors who work along with their husbands as a joint venture in this trade and two women vendors who work to supplement their husband’s income.

In India, where patriarchy prevails, culture and religion demand that a woman be shy, retiring and generally confined to the precincts of the house. In Guwahati, the social restriction seemed less severe and more than half of the women vendors including the single, widowed or those married to men who did not work, have to work outside the house because of necessity (which is not conventional), in addition to their role as mother or wife.

Janki (32) is a Bihari woman married to a carpenter who used to work in a furniture shop in Kharghuli (near Uzanbazar market). He lost his job because he was a drunkard. Janki with two children (aged 4 and 2 years) had to work to subsist. She worked as a part-time domestic help (only one shift) in three households in the neighbourhood on a monthly payment of Rs. 100 each. Before the pay was due Janki’s husband used to go to these households and take advance payment and spend it on drinking. Not knowing what to do, she started by opening a small sale counter of boiled eggs in the nearby market place. Every afternoon she took her
two children along and sold from about 3 p.m. till about 7 p.m. in the evening. Later, she expanded by selling tea, bun and biscuit. This business has contributed in a great way in meeting the growing expenses of her family.

Women’s involvement in street food trade shows that women act as individual operators or as assistants to their husbands (in case of wife) in the place of sale and at home as unpaid home help. But when a woman vendor becomes successful, she is assisted by her husband or some other male relatives. However, the reverse is not true. When a man is successful, the first thing he does is to remove his wife from the business and in her place hired labourers are engaged.

It has been observed that female vendors spend more time in preparation of food and less time in vending. This is due to the fact that women have to tend to the house and look after children as well. Thus it affects women’s income.

Mina Roy (31) is a Bengali woman who sells roti-sabji and vegetarian meals near a construction site near Noonmati. She lives along with her husband and three children in the same location. Her husband is the gate keeper of the construction site and earns a salary of Rs. 500.00 per month. With this money Mina finds it difficult to make ends meet. So with her husband’s approval (who also assists her) she began her enterprise. She serves afternoon meals on a contract basis to all the construction workers and other casual labourers engaged in the site. This gives her a net profit of Rs. 60-70 per day.
She regrets that if she could sell for the entire day (she has to look after her new born child and do other household tasks), she would have made double the profit.

From the above discussion, it is apparent that this activity can be carried out by persons with little or no skill and with a nominal investment. The average income made from this activity is more than that of a daily wage earner in the city and equal to that of a semi-skilled worker. Inspite of this activity permitting easy entry, requiring less skill and yielding a substantial return, it has not expanded. Financial constraint and municipal harassment are important factors which have restricted the street food vendors from expanding their trade.