CHAPTER EIGHT
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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The study has dealt with street food vending as an important activity in the informal sector. It is exploratory in nature, based on intensive fieldwork carried out within the municipal boundaries of Guwahati city.

Street food vending is a global phenomenon. It is a ubiquitous activity not only in the Third World countries but even in the developed cities of the West. While street food vending and similar activities in the urban informal sector have been criticized by urban planners as traditional and as a reminder of underdevelopment, this study has tried to establish street food vending as an important urban service and at the same time providing employment to a large number of unskilled and uneducated people. On the basis of the data collected, the study has tried to analyze some of the important issues, certain commonly held assumptions and the hypotheses outlined in the Chapter One.

The study outlines the genesis and spread of street food in Guwahati. Street food is relatively a new phenomenon in Guwahati which has become prevalent only during the last three to four decades. Earlier, eating of cooked food was largely confined to one's home or among people of same or similar caste status. Gradual urban development and increased
cosmopolitan population, primarily due to migration of different ethnic groups, led to relaxation of caste restrictions associated with cooking and eating of food. A new food which was not confined to the domestic hearth came to be accepted.

Assamese food encompasses a variety of snacks and light meals. Assamese people lacked a tradition of eating out. They never patronized street food because cooking and eating were involved with ritual prohibitions and restrictions. Though many of the Assamese snacks and light meals have portability and durability and are relatively free from ritual pollution, none of these appeared as street food in the urban situation of Guwahati. As outlined in Chapter Four, none among the diverse variety of relishes, snacks, light meals, sweetmeats, fruits, juices and meals are typical Assamese food. Two of the items, chanachur and bhapa pitha have a parallel to Assamese mahkarai and tekeli mukhat diya pitha, respectively. However, the makers and sellers of these food are not Assamese but Bihari vendors. Also, these items are eaten largely by the non-Assamese people. In spite of the fact that tekeli mukhat diya pitha and boot pitha were vended in some rural markets of Assam by Assamese vendors, it is seen that none of the present street food vendors in the study sample sell these items or any other traditional snacks and light meals which have the attributes of street food.

Guwahati is not merely the largest city in north east India having a rich historical past, it has also emerged as a thriving centre of street food. It has been attracting diverse groups of people from different parts of the country as well as from within the state. In addition to a large
number of migrants who have settled here with families, there are numerous others who have come alone. They include a large number of informal sector workers, people in transferable jobs, travellers, daily commuters, etc., who are dependent on street food. It is cheap, easily available and provides snacks and wholesome meals.

It will have been noted that despite being the biggest city in the north east, Guwahati lacks basic infrastructural and urban facilities. This has also affected street food vendors and their operations. There is very limited provision of safe drinking water, drainage facility is poor, garbage disposal system is inadequate and the sewerage system can hardly sustain the city population. All these inadequacies have led to environmental degradation and make the city a very polluted locale. Street food vending under such conditions is a hazardous operation.

In Chapter Four, some popular varieties of street food have been described. It is evident that the items of food vended are not local food. These have entered Assam through diffusion along with the migration of people from different parts of India. It is these migrants who have popularized street food in Guwahati. Another significant finding is that street food comprises not only snacks and relishes but also meals.

Coming now to the street food vendors (described in Chapter Five), some important findings regarding the socio-demographic patterns and backgrounds of food vendors are highlighted here.

Street food vendors in Guwahati are middle-aged men and women hailing from different parts of Assam and the states of Bihar and
West Bengal. It is a permanent activity for most of them. Educational attainment, which is an important feature of social and economic mobility, is very low. In the study sample, more than half the vendors (55.6%) are either illiterate or barely literate and the rest have completed various levels of schooling. Out of 360 vendors, only one is a graduate and five vendors have passed the tenth standard. Under such conditions, getting job in the formal sector is difficult. Often street food vendors have been criticized by urban planners as young people waiting for jobs in the formal sector who take up this activity as a temporary work. This study reveals that street food vendors are not young but middle aged people who consider their business as a life time activity. Thus vending in street food perhaps cannot be called as part-time or temporary activity practiced by young men while waiting for jobs in formal sector.

A look at the caste background of vendors shows that street food vendors belong to a variety of caste groups. Except for two castes, the Halwai and Moira, who are traditional sweetmeat makers, the rest do not have any background in handling or vending food as a traditional caste occupation. In the study sample, the percentages of the above mentioned caste groups are also not significant. Numerically, the ‘Rajput’ caste of Bihar origin predominate among the street food vendors in Guwahati. They did not have any background in cooking or selling of cooked food in their place of origin. Their dominance in street food vending in Guwahati is the result of social network, kinship, village and locality bonds leading to chain migration.
The occupational mobility of vendors studied shows that for 9.1 per cent of vendors, selling of street food has been a part of the family business for at least two to three generations. They include Bihari chanachur and pakora sellers and some Bengali sweetmeat vendors. The rest of the vendors have been practicing agriculture and some have followed their caste occupation. Among the Assamese vendors, only one has been selling tea and snacks along with his father as a family business. The rest have no family history of selling street food.

Migration of food vendors reveals many important features. The street food vendors are rural migrants hailing from Bihar, West Bengal and different parts of Assam. A considerable proportion of them have lived in the city for more than two years and out of them 52.31 per cent have completed 10 years of stay in Guwahati. Some of them have sold the same items and in the same location over a long period of time. One of the main causes of migration is rural poverty. Other causes are pull of the city, maladjustment in family, etc. Many of the migrant vendors possess agricultural land (including 159 permanent migrants and 31 seasonal migrants) but it is not enough to sustain the family. During planting and harvesting seasons some of the vendors visit their natal home and assist in agricultural activities.

The family structures of the vendors studied reveals that nuclear family predominates. The families of the vendors who live in the study area, are nuclear in type. While families living in the villages are by and large variation of nuclear family or of the joint family type. The average size of the vendors' family is 6.75.
The street food vendors of Guwahati have been divided into stationary and mobile based on their nature of vending. Though numerically the mobile vendors predominate, truely mobile vendors are rare. Only those selling sweetmeats and snacks like laddu, chips, fruit slices, etc. are truely mobile. The rest have one or two regular points from where they vend.

The study of food vending locations in Guwahati reveal that they are found in all areas of the city. High concentrations of street food vendors are found near market places, recreation centers, schools, offices, hospitals, railway and bus stations, etc. A look at the distribution of different types of food vendors show a concentration in the main commercial areas of Fancy bazar, Pan bazar, Athgaon and Paltan bazar.

In the street food trade, as described in Chapter Six, vendors do not keep written records. Therefore, by estimating daily costs and observing daily sale, the return on this trade has been calculated. The average income has been found to be Rs. 50.00 per day. However, income varies within this activity. Male vendors make more income than female vendors because a female vendor has to attend to the family and perform household tasks.

Women in the street food trade reveals that though they constitutes only 3.9 per cent of the total study sample, their income is vital. Out of 14 women vendors, six are sole supporters, six works with their husbands and two run street food enterprises to supplement their husband’s income.

In Guwahati, the enterprises are generally of one-person type usually run by the vendor himself with additional support from family members and hired workers. The other type consist of two-person
enterprises run by husband and wife or partnership between brothers, friends or other relatives. There is only one enterprises run by three persons.

Regarding division of labour in a couple-run enterprise, the preparation of food done at home was the wife's task but, at the place of sale, she assumes a secondary role. It has been observed that in some of the enterprises, woman makes the beginning, when she becomes successful, she is joined by her husband and later, on attaining further success, the wife is withdrawn from the enterprise because it becomes a matter of prestige for a successful man to engage his wife in the trade.

Expansion of street food trade is an indication of growth. Certain important conclusions can be drawn. Vendors would like to expand but because of financial constraints, and harassment by police and municipal authorities very few vendors actually do so. This study has shown that instead of investing in the trade, profit is utilized in other directions. But vendors belonging to the higher income group have expanded. Such expansion is usually by increasing inventory and by employing additional labour.

The street food activity relatively requires very little skill which can be learnt as apprentice or at home. People without any skill for other jobs find it convenient to start this activity easily and with minimum investment. Thus street food vending, which is characterized by ease of entry, minimum investment, small size of operation, etc., draws a large section of people towards this activity.

The discussion on municipal control over street food has shown that though it provides employment to many and constitutes an essential
service in the fast developing city of Guwahati, the vendors are also persecuted and there is considerable antipathy towards them. The argument is that street food vendors make and sell edibles under dirty conditions, block roads and is a symbol of urban blight to be removed. But this argument cannot be the sole reason for the government and municipal authorities to drive away food vendors. Little do the authorities realize the growing significance of street food vending to the economy and society at large. In a country like India, where unemployment is rampant, street food vending plays an important role in providing self employment to a large section of people. But this important service has not been legitimized. The street food vendors of Guwahati are not given trade licenses to vend. The vendors with pushcarts are merely given licenses for slow moving vehicles.

Street food has emerged in the study area largely as a result of migration of diverse groups of people due to urbanization and industrialization, relaxation of caste restrictions associated with cooking and eating because of increased cosmopolitanism and the need to eat from out-of-home sources in an urban environment cheaply and quickly. Today street food has become an indispensable part of the city life.

The marxists and liberal economists had predicted that street food vending would disappear in due course of time. Instead, it has only flourished over the years. Keeping in mind its importance as a source of self employment and in rendering a valuable service, pursuing a more sympathetic policy by the relevant administrative agencies of the government will lead to a healthy growth of this activity. Following a policy of harassment and indifference will hardly eliminate the problems of congestion or dirty
environment. What is required is awareness of the problem and concerted effort to try and create a support system which will legitimize the street food sector.

It is suggested that concerned authorities should recognize street food vending as a required urban amenity and not as a nuisance to be done away with. The nuisance perception arises from the fact that the vendors create congestion on the road, traffic hazard as well as health and pollution problems. Hence, the popular argument that they have no business to be on the street and that they must be shifted from the pavements. Keeping in view the genuine service that street food vendors provide to commuters and humble workers in the city on the one hand and the commonly recognized problems to urban life that they create on the other, the following suggestions are offered which could help this informal yet vital service sector and also mitigate the problems.

(i) Legitimized space should be provided to the street food vendors in the high vending concentration areas but a little away from the main roads, preferably in a side road where customers can reach them. This will help eliminate congestion in the area at large and reduce pollution.

(ii) The food vendors should be registered for a specified time period and a fee charged from them for the space. This money should be utilized directly in the maintenance of the space allotted. Basic facilities like drinking water, garbage disposal, lighting, etc. should be provided.
(iii) There is a need for creation of “food parks” in select recreation centers where cleanliness and hygiene are strictly maintained.

(iv) Vendors should be made aware of the importance of hygiene and at all stages of handling food. Regular inspections should be conducted from time to time.

In conclusion, this study calls upon all concerned to legitimize this vital service and support it through proper planning so as to make street food vending healthy, convenient and desirable.