CHAPTER ONE
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INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM

The study deals with street food vending as an enterprise, its socio-cultural importance and significance in the urban economy of Guwahati city. 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 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 Guwahati, the capital of Assam and the largest urban centre in the north eastern region of India.\footnote{This region comprises of seven states, viz. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura.}
Street food vending implies the activities related to the making and selling of food on the streets. Such food includes anything sold on the streets that can be eaten without further processing. Street food encompasses all types of edibles: relishes, snacks, sweetmeats, fruits, beverages and even meals. The vending is done mostly from pushcarts, baskets, carrying poles or stalls having fewer than four permanent walls (Tinker 1987:52). A roadside vendor may operate at one place for years together, yet transience and mobility are implicit attributes of street food.

The importance of ready-to-eat food in a city or an urban area is undeniable. Visitors, travellers, businessmen, labourers and workers who come to work or attend their business in courts, hospitals and offices or men who do not have their families with them have to depend on hotels, restaurants or 'open' food vending commercial devices for food. Eating in a restaurant on a regular basis is costly for many people. Street food is cheaper. The service is prompt and the food can be as 'safe' as restaurant cooked food (Kulkarni 1992).

Many people, young and old, men and women, today buy and eat commercially cooked food obtained from out-of-home sources. In the olden days, particularly for the Hindus, cooking and eating were confined to the domestic hearth - an area of high purity, even sanctity (Khare 1976). Commensality between members of different castes and communities were also restricted. Hence, partaking of cooked food outside home (where the social background and the caste of the cook are unknown) meant breaking of social norms which called for expiation rites. With progressive urbanization and industrialization, ritual restrictions on handling of cooked
food and feeding people across caste and community lines have largely disappeared (Khare 1976a: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 have come to be accepted. As Khare notes, the relaxation of caste restrictions on cooked food has become a necessity and eating out is increasingly becoming popular as a "... non-sacred, social art, activity and entertainment" (ibid).

The prevalence of street food has gone hand in hand with the growth of a cosmopolitan population coming from different parts of the country. Earlier, Guwahati was predominantly inhabited by the Assamese people - both Hindus and Muslims. Though townsmen, such people hardly ever patronized street food. There is also no tradition of street food in Assamese culture. It is only in the last three to four decades that street food vending has come to be prevalent in Guwahati. This is primarily because of migration of different ethnic groups associated with urbanization and industrialization.

**Objectives of the study**

(i) The study outlines what is street food, who make, sell and eat street food in Guwahati.

(ii) This study tries to trace the evolution of street food in Guwahati, the forces and factors which led to the emergence of such food and the existence of a background of quick and ready-to-eat food.
(iii) It assesses the importance of street food vending in providing self employment in the urban areas of Guwahati and also valuable service to the urban masses by supplying ready-to-eat food.

(iv) The association of caste, community, family tradition and ethnic background with food vending is examined.

(v) This study seeks to analyze street food vending as a specific economic activity, its division of labour, income derived and the distribution and importance of street food in the diet of the customers.

(vi) The study tries to bring out the role of women in the street food trade, especially women workers who contribute to street food preparation as household workers.

**Hypotheses**

To achieve the above mentioned objectives, a number of hypotheses and assumptions were formulated and tested in the course of the study. In the formulation of the hypotheses, due note was taken of the findings of the studies on street food conducted in seven countries by the Equity Policy Centre (EPOC), a non-profit research and policy group in Washington, DC, U.S.A. (Tinker 1987). The following hypotheses have been formulated and examined.

(i) The street food vendors are young people waiting for jobs in the formal sector, thus making this activity transitory and peripheral.
(ii) In the multi-country study of street food, the vendors of tropical areas do not invest in permanent structures. It appears that in Guwahati too the vendors are hesitant to invest in permanent structures.

(iii) The truly mobile vendor is in the minority.

(iv) Demand for street food is due to many factors such as increase in day-time population of the city, large number of males who do not have their families with them, lack of accommodation and cooking places for many new migrants, a very large number of daily commuters and increase in truck traffic.

(v) Street food vending is a permanent occupation for many.

(vi) Street food is considered as snack and not as full meal.

Scope of the study

This study is based on a field study of the vendors and customers in the city of Guwahati. Development planners and social workers have largely ignored the economic, social and cultural importance of street food selling and similar activities. The scope of this study lies in establishing the economic, social and cultural importance of street food in the urban informal sector.

The study covers activities related to street food, its demand and supply within a single sector. It examines work done both by men and women in a bid to understand actual work and unpaid domestic work. This
study attempts to cover all important areas within the main city. Many outlying areas have remained uncovered. This is because Guwahati is spread over a vast area making it difficult to tackle single-handedly. Hence, the researcher had to delimit the area of study. An attempt has been made to cover all types of vendors involved in this activity. However, exact number of the vendors could not be determined as there is no constancy of number.

**Significance of the study**

Recording of anthropological parameters such as caste and community, migration and economy has been attempted in this study.

The study is significant because it documents only one activity in the informal sector to analyze the participation of men and women in this work.

Furthermore, the significance of this study lies in highlighting the importance of street food vending to the economy and to the society at large. There is a tendency for many people to regard street food as something trivial, which creates health hazards and which should be removed. However, the study tries to show that street food vending is of urban convenience and has a positive role to play in a growing city like Guwahati, effectively serving a large number of people as well as generating employment.
THE INFORMAL SECTOR AND STREET FOOD VENDING

Before dealing with the activities of street food vending and the vendors, it is necessary to have a clear idea of the term ‘informal sector’. Studies carried out in the early 1970’s by International Labour Office (ILO) on employment in metropolitan cities of developing countries led to a new concept which aroused a great deal of controversy: the concept of informal sector (IFS) as against the formal sector (FS), which constitute the urban economy of the Third-World countries (ILO 1972).

The accelerated rate of growth of population in developing countries has resulted in large scale migration of people to cities and towns. This migration of rural poor to urban areas in search of work and livelihood reflects the spill-over of rural poverty (Tripathy and Das 1991:2). Economic development has failed to generate adequate employment and income opportunities in the formal sector. Under these conditions, the surplus labour force has no option but to find their own employment and source of income. The unskilled and semi-skilled rural migrants to metropolitan cities seek jobs in the informal sector of the urban economy, as construction workers, domestic servants, street food vendors, peddlers, hawkers, cycle and auto mechanics, junk collectors, basket weavers, barbers, cycle rickshaw pullers and shack shop and tea stall keepers. All these are an essential part of the urban economy. These services and activities cater to the needs of people belonging to different socio-economic strata in the towns and cities. The emergence of a new category of activities involving persons engaged in a variety of productive activities is now called the informal sector. The coexistence of two sectors, the formal and the informal,
shows structural dualism in urban economy in terms of size, mode of production, technology, productivity and labour market which has assumed special importance because of the belief that economic development based on the formal sector alone is not the most desirable way of development. A development strategy which combines or emphasizes the growth of small and informal organization may produce quick and equitable development.

Following this trend of dualism theory in urban sector, the ILO-UNDP Employment Mission to Kenya mentioned the following characteristics of the informal sector (Romatet 1983). These are:


Santos (ibid., p. 2115) enlarged upon the ILO approach and added the following characteristics:

(i) There is potential for innovation.

(ii) Though employment is insecure and the number of people employed by each unit is small, yet as there are numerous small-scale units, the total number of employees are quite substantial.

(iii) Activities are based on cash transactions or on direct and personal credit.
(iv) Capital accumulation and reinvestment is low.

(v) Numerous middlemen operate between the initial supplier and the final buyer.

(vi) Exchanges are made on small quantities as investors are limited and working capital low.

(vii) In most cases, units do not keep regular accounts.

For many years, the urban street food trade was dismissed as insignificant economic activity by development economists. The marxists and liberal economists considered street food and other microenterprises as remnants of earlier economic systems which would eventually disappear as development proceeded. Despite these theoretical predictions, the vendors have not disappeared, but “have increased in variety and numbers as rural migrants flood the cities of the developing world” (Tinker 1994:4). Further, according to both the perspectives, the informal sector was expected to disappear in the wake of modernization. Both these schools of thought were forced to reinterpret theories so as to explain these economic activities. However, even after the informal sector was recognized, the tiny enterprises like street food were largely excluded from ILO research and national counting, because as single-person and family activities they were judged as too small to grow and employ others. Nevertheless, street food vending has become an integral part of urban life.
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Study of food and food habits are of great relevance to economists, geographers and anthropologists. The anthropologist, Jack Goody (1982), examined the contributions of functionalists and structure-functionalist and also cultural approaches and studies on change as a part and parcel of anthropological studies of food.

In the Nineteenth century, interest on the study of food centered around taboo, totemism and sacrifice. One of the prominent figures who contributed to this field was Sir James Frazer who wrote an article on taboo and totemism for the ninth edition of Encyclopaedia Britannica. Ernest Crawley (1927) studied the religious aspects of sexual relations. Another favourite topic was the relation between offerings of food to the supernatural and aspects of social organization, highlighted in the well known study by Robertson Smith (1889). Radcliffe-Brown’s (1948) study of the Andaman Islanders closely followed the approach of Robertson Smith. According to Radcliffe-Brown, the Andaman Islanders’ most important activity is procuring food and it is around food that “the social sentiments are most frequently called into action” (ibid., p. 227).

Bronislaw Malinowski was more concerned with the process of production than with symbolism. In the introduction to Audrey Richards’ first essay (1932) entitled Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe, Malinowski described the book as ‘the first collection of facts on the cultural aspects of food and eating’ (p. ix), and as laying ‘the foundations for a sociological theory of nutrition’ (p. x). Audrey Richards in her later book (1939:405)
discussed the symbolism of cooked food in which food transaction is an indicator of social relations. Throughout her work, there is an insistence on the 'sociological aspects' of diet and the 'cultural determinants of food and feeding'. Based on the study of nutrition in Africa, Meyer and Sonia Fortes' article entitled 'Food in the Domestic Economy of the Tallensi' (1936) dealt with aspects of production and consumption at the domestic level.

The outbreak of World War II saw a cooperation between different disciplines in food related studies, leading to more practical oriented studies. The establishment of the Committee on Food Habits in United States resulted in a valuable study by Carl Guthe and Margaret Mead (1945). This work is valued for its practical applicability. Sociological aspects of nutrition in daily life and post war nutrition studies were some of the important areas of research by nutritionists and social thinkers.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the analysis of cooking has been primarily associated with the name of Claude Levi-Strauss. His focus of study is very different from that of the earlier thinkers. He attempted to study the 'deep structures' of the human mind to analyze social action. His specific theoretical interest in the subject of cooking was evident in chapter 5 of his collected essays entitled Structural Anthropology (1963). Later, in an article entitled 'Le triangle culinaire' (1965), he developed the subject of cooking more clearly. In his study of myth, Levi-Strauss studied the role of fire in transforming food from the raw to the cooked state, the process he saw as marking the emergence of humanity.
To sketch the general background of anthropological contributions to the study of food and food habits, Goody (1982) referred to some recent studies, particularly that of Mary Douglas, who directed attention to cooking and ‘the analysis of the meal’. Although she sees food as linked to biological and social facts, it is the latter aspect that interested her when she attempted to ‘decipher a meal’ (1972).

A few studies of change involving historical sources and methods were made by European sociologists and anthropologists. Work on the social history of food was not only confined to France or Western Europe but also spread to the Third World. It combines both anthropological and historical perspectives. Mintz’s essay on ‘Time, Sugar and Sweetness’ (1979) examined the political and economic forces behind the availability of sugar and its relationship to slavery in the Third World. Goody (1982) dealt with cooking from the point of diversified structures of households and class. The analysis of cooking, according to him, is related to the distribution of power and authority in the economic sphere, that is, to the system of class or stratification and to it’s political ramification (ibid., p. 37).

India has a rich history of culinary studies as evident from a number of early accounts. Mazumdar’s article (1935) has at length discussed about food types and feasting as found in the different ancient texts in India. According to the Taittiriya Upanishada, the primary aspects of our organic existence depend upon food for its subsistence. The Rig Veda, the Buddhist literatures and Vatsyayana have described about the ideal types of food and meals.
The ancient text *Ayurveda* made India the only health conscious nation in the world (Kalra 1992). It prescribed a balanced and healthy diet. The text further revealed a full fledged culinary philosophy which concerned itself with nutrition as much with taste. In fact, Indian food was considered to have both medicinal and therapeutic values.

Some early cultural information about Assam is to be had in the *Yogini Tantra*. The Tantra described at length about the food and food taboos of the people of Kamrupa (Neog 1966). It advised the people of Kamrupa not to give up fish and meat. A later work *Kumara-Harana* also described the different food and recipes of Assam (Achaya 1994).

Food related studies in India in the 1950s and 1960s were mostly centred around the popular theme of caste and commensality. Some of the prominent figures like Srinivas (1952), Marriott (1955b) and Dumont (1970) have to some extent followed the trend from earlier writers like Dubois (1906) and Hutton (1951).

In the 1970s, Khare made valuable theoretical contribution towards the study of food and the domestic hearth (1976a). His ethnographic study on the contemporary ways of handling food within and around the north Indian Hindu household demonstrated different aspects of the gastronomic system. It shows how food has been made meaningful culturally and socially not only for eating but also transaction. His study (1976b) raised a number of conceptual issues concerning the Hindu culinary relations and the cultural implications derived from the ideological base of the culinary system. He also observed the changes taking place to secularize food. His
edited book (1992) dealing with both Hindu and Buddhist eternal food comprises many thought provoking articles on the symbolic and ritualistic aspects of food.

**Studies on street food**

The study of street food vending was conceived by the Equity Policy Centre, a research organization based in the USA, in 1980. The first round of study was conducted between 1982-84 in Philippines (Barth and Kuo 1984), Indonesia (Chapman 1984), Bangladesh (Owens and Hussain 1984) and Senegal (Posner 1984). The second round took place between 1984-86 in Nigeria (Kujore et al. 1986), Egypt (Loza 1985) and Thailand (Szanton and Sirisambhand 1986). These studies established the importance of informal sector to urban employment and service and the significant role that women play in the sector. After a restudy of these seven countries, a combined account of such studies along with analyses of findings, steps to improve income of vendors and safety of street food have been published by Tinker (1997).

In India, studies on street food vending have been limited. Reference may be made to a few studies by Bapat (1990, 1992) and Kulkarni (1992). Bapat’s studies aimed at gathering information about current policies, street food vendors, their practices and clients, food quality, nutritional value and hygiene. Kulkarni’s study is an important work of licensed and unlicensed street food vendors in Pune. He studied the vendors in terms of such aspects as status, income, clientele, hygiene and food safety, etc. He tested samples
of food and water from street vendors as well as restaurants and revealed that restaurant food was no more hygienic than street food. The study also emphasized the need to improve the street food sector in India.

This study on street food vending in urban Guwahati is similar to the studies conducted by Equity Policy Centre. It explores and gathers data on a specific economic activity in the informal sector within the municipal boundary of Guwahati city. The study also considers the anthropological dimensions of caste and community factors associated with street food. So far as my knowledge goes, studies of this kind have not been done in Assam.

FIELDWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This dissertation describes the nature of street food vending and other associated aspects in Guwahati city. The basic ethnographic materials, on which the study is based, were collected from a cross-section of street food vendors and customers within the municipal area of the city. Selection of the study area was made keeping in mind several factors. First, Guwahati’s congenial location as the gateway to the entire north eastern India. Secondly, since historic times, Guwahati has been occupying a place of importance as a centre of political and administrative power. It has been the capital of many ruling dynasties of Assam. Thirdly, Guwahati is the premier city of the region. It is a sort of nerve centre of all urban activities and a suitable setting for the emergence and thriving of street food.
Selection of the area of study was followed by initial library work at Guwahati, Calcutta and Delhi where books, journals, gazetteers, census reports, theses, newspaper articles and various other literary sources having relevance to the topic of study were scanned. The problem was discussed with several anthropologists, sociologists, folklorists, geographers, literateurs and economists. Relevant informations were also collected from the Health Department of the Government of Assam, Guwahati Medical College, Guwahati Municipal Corporation and Historical and Antiquarian Studies Department.

**Fieldwork**

The first stage of fieldwork consisted of collecting information on street food from January to March of 1991. It was an exploratory study consisting of detailed case studies to test the feasibility of the topic. Later, in June-July 1991, the roads of the city were surveyed to identify the 'main vending areas'. The 'main vending areas' would imply those areas or centres where vendors gravitate naturally because there is adequate demand for the items they vend. Such vending areas or centres are near schools and colleges, government offices, commercial areas, construction sites, motor garages, amusement centres and even residential areas. These vending areas were surveyed and in each of them, the number of vendors, nature of vending, types of food vended and the importance of each location were taken into account. This data collection drive took place for seven days at a
stretch to give an almost ‘static’ picture of the food vending scenario in Guwahati.

After the study on the food vendors commenced, it soon became apparent that there were no ready source of information which would indicate the number of vendors operating on the streets of the city, where they were located and why they were operating as food vendors. A field survey that would generate qualitative information and also provide some quantifiable data seemed to be an appropriate step. In this stage of field work, detailed information with the help of schedules were collected from different types of street food vendors. A ‘basic information schedule’ was designed to gather both qualitative and quantitative data about the vendors and their trades. This schedule contains seven major sections. Each section is divided into several sub-sections and the questions are both open and close-ended. In addition, customers’ tastes and preferences were taken into account by interviewing a cross-section of people on whom the ‘customer survey schedule’ was administered\(^2\). This stage of field work took almost one and half years to complete.

It was not easy to approach the vendors directly for filling in the ‘basic information schedule’. A printed schedule would upset the vendor’s natural response and put him on guard. In such a situation, conventional anthropological techniques like direct observation and informal chat proved useful. At times, the present investigator had to approach the vendors as a

\(^2\)See Appendices I and II.
customer and observe the activities of cooking and selling, the types of food, time of vending, location, types of customers, etc. In this manner, she had to move from vendor to vendor in an attempt to understand the vending process. These movements did not go unnoticed and evoked curiosity among the vendors. But gradually as familiarity grew and rapport established, such curiosity disappeared. Also, explaining the purpose of visit helped dispel their doubts about she being a government or a municipal official.

In the course of fieldwork, some of the vendors were too busy to pay attention to the investigator. Once, a vendor mistook her for a person coming to collect donation and quickly gave a two rupee note. Sometimes it so happened that several visits had to be made to meet the same vendor, but when the results were not very encouraging one felt disappointed. However, persistent efforts paid off and helped in establishing a more friendly rapport.

Information about family, assets and investment were not easy to obtain. At times, to find out the role of women and children in this trade, it was necessary to question not only the vendor but also his wife. Visits to the vendor's workplace and home to interview the wife and observe what she does brought to light many important aspects of this trade. At first, some women appeared to be uncommunicative in the presence of their menfolk, but after the husbands left for work, they talked about their activities both at home and those related to street food.
Techniques used in field investigation

In the actual course of collecting data, several important techniques were applied. Observation proved to be one of the most important tool of data collection. All activities connected with preparing, selling and eating of different kinds of street food were observed carefully. Also, interview aided by the schedules proved to be useful. It was used to elicit information about the vendors and customers. Knowledge about the trade, communities associated with street food, recipes of food and problems faced by vendors, etc., was gathered through interview. Most of the interviews were individual interviews with the use of an interview guide. At times group interviews were taken in those places where a cluster of vendors operated. These interviews helped in cross-checking and clarifying information about migration, caste, community, traditional occupation and problems faced by vendors in Guwahati.

Case study method proved to be very effective in deriving personal information relating to the beginning of vending as a career, success and failure in street food vending, migration, etc.

Data collection was also supplemented with photographs. These were invaluable in reconstructing the transaction between vendors and customers. In addition, the food inventory could be meticulously and thoroughly worked out with the help of the photographs.
Universe of study

The study of any problem on scientific lines is closely related to the universe. It is a set of elements to which the procedures or measurements are to be applied. In any conventional anthropological study, the village or local community is the universe of the study. The street food vendors do not make up such a community. Ethnic homogeneity and well defined boundary of the community are also lacking. Yet the vendors constitute a definable category in view of their distinctive activity. In a way, all the street food vendors of Guwahati may be regarded as constituting the wider universe.

The exact number of street food vendors is difficult to determine. There is no municipal census of vendors. The vendors also keep changing locations frequently. Furthermore, the number of vendors increases whenever the demand for street food rises. All these factors make vendor count difficult. However, a rough estimation of the different types of food vendors may be put at around 3000. Under such circumstances, it was necessary to resort to deliberate sampling. This kind of sampling method is known as convenience sampling, where the sample is obtained by selecting convenient population units. It is suitable when the universe is not clearly defined and when complete source list is not available (Pillai and Bagavathi 1984:194).

In order to derive the sample, the main vending areas including important roads, city bus stops, transport terminals, offices, courts, hospitals, markets, educational institutions, parks, cinema halls, etc., were screened for vendor counting. While it was easy to locate the vendors who
sold from fixed places, it was not possible to track all the mobile vendors for they were on the move for most times of the day. Thus all vendors present in the main vending areas at the time of data collection have been interviewed. The sample size consists of 360 vendors including 100 stationary and 260 mobile vendors.

Every effort has been made to present in this study objective and authentic data. All data including case studies have been presented in the ‘ethnographic present’. As Piddington (1957:685) noted:

"....that we shall write in the present tense, with the reminder that this applies to the time at which the ethnographic observations were made and not to the conditions existing in the present time".

The names of persons used in the case studies are fictitious with a view to preserving the anonymity of the individuals.

**PRESENTATION OF THE MATERIAL**

The present study incorporates an account of street food vending in Guwahati. In formulating the plan for the present study, from fieldwork to writing down the thesis, it has been found convenient to maintain a wide approach.

Following this chapter, Chapter Two provides a general outline of Assamese food. Some aspects of Assamese food habits and ritual rules associated with cooking and eating of cooked food have been discussed. In
addition, an inventory of food and snack in Assamese culture have been described. This chapter aims to provide a background as to how street food represents a new development in the context of the overall culture of food and eating habits of the Assamese.

Chapter Three to Chapter Seven constitute the core of the thesis. Chapter Three gives a profile of Guwahati as the setting. A brief historical background has been given to show the patterns of migration of diverse groups of people with different cultures and food habits into Guwahati, thus providing an ideal setting for the emergence of street food sector. In addition, the growing importance of the city as a centre of trade, commerce, transport, education, etc., has been highlighted.

Chapters Five and Six deal with street food vendors and vending as an economic activity. Chapter Five provides a detailed account of the demographic outline and socio-economic and cultural life of the vendors. Operational aspects of street food trade have been dealt with in Chapter Six. In this chapter, an attempt is made to examine investment, income, expansion of trade, division of labour and involvement of women.

The description of street food vendors and trade alone can hardly provide a comprehensive picture of street food vending in Guwahati. Existing municipal rules and regulations with regard to safety of street food, licensing, sanitary aspects associated with food vending, etc., have been examined in Chapter Seven.

The concluding chapter, that is, Chapter Eight, contains a brief summary of the preceding chapters followed by a discussion on the major
findings. It gives a prognosis and offers suggestions for improvement of street food vending as an important sector both in terms of the valuable service rendered and as a source of income for urban poor.