

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND THE PROBLEMS FACED BY THE STREET FOOD VENDORS OF SONITPUR DISTRICT OF ASSAM.

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ABSTRACT

In most Indian cities or towns, the urban poor survive by working in the informal sector. Poverty and lack of gainful employment in the rural areas drive large numbers of people to cities/towns for work and livelihood. As permanent protected jobs in the organized sector are shrinking so working in the informal sector are the only means for their survival. This has led to rapid growth of the informal sector in most of the cities of India. For these poor, street vending is one of the means of earning a livelihood. In recent years Assam has been experiencing substantial increase in the number of street vendors. The paper has made an attempt to examine the socio-economic and work related conditions of the street food vendors of Sonitpur District of Assam. It has also highlighted some of the policies and the organizations that have been developed for the protection of these vendors.

Keywords: Socio-economic conditions, Street Vendors, Policies, Sonitpur District.

1. INTRODUCTION

In most Indian cities or towns, the urban poor survive by working in the informal sector. Poverty and lack of gainful employment in the rural areas drive large numbers of people to cities/towns for work and livelihood. These people generally possess low skills and lack the level of education required for the better paid jobs in the organized sector. Besides, permanent protected jobs in the organized sector are shrinking. So even those having the requisite skills are unable to find proper employment. For these people work in the informal sector are the only means for their survival. This has led to rapid growth of the informal sector in most of the cities. For these poor, street vending is one of the means of earning a livelihood [1].

Street vendors are an integral part of urban economies around the world since ancient times. In many cities and towns of India, street vending is a large source of employment [2] and contributes significantly to household incomes [3,4,5]. There is substantial increase in the number of street vendors in the various cities and towns around the world. As per ILO Report 2002, in India Street vendors represent around 3 percent of total non-agricultural employment. This translates to more than 3.1 million street traders across the country. According to a study conducted during 1999-2000, by the National Association of Street Vendors of India

(NASVI), Mumbai has the largest number of street vendors numbering around 2.5 lakhs followed by Delhi 2 lakhs, Kolkata 1.5 lakhs, Ahmadabad and Patna around 80,000 each.

The academic literature on street vending commonly treats street vendors as those who offers goods for sale to the public at large without having a permanent built up structure from which to sale. In the Report of 2006 – ‘Street Vendor Policy’, it has been recognized that there are three basic categories of street vendors. First, those street vendors who carry out vending on a regular basis and at a specific location. Secondly, those street vendors who carry vending not on a regular basis and without a specific location. Third, the mobile street vendors. Thus, the street vendors may be stationary by occupying the pavements or other places, or may be mobile in the sense that they move from one place to another carrying their carts or baskets or cycles.

Street vending survives not merely because it is an important source of employment but also because of the services it provides to the urban population [6]. The vendors are protected neither by India’s Existing Labour Protection Laws nor the Social Security Laws. They have no security in work or life and there is no mechanism to provide for fair wages, occupational health safety or welfare. Many unemployed person opt for street vending as there is easy entry and exit from the business and free mobility within the sector.

In the light of the above background, the paper has made an attempt to examine the socio-economic and work related conditions of the street food vendors of Sonitpur District of Assam. The paper has also highlighted some of the policies and the organizations that have been developed for the protection of these vendors.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data has been collected from the vendors of Sonitpur District from March to June, 2017. A total of 100 street food vendors from different locations of the district have been selected for the purpose of the study using simple random sampling technique. Data has been collected from the street food vendors through personal investigation using pre-structured questionnaire cum schedule. Data was collected at their work place during the working hours when the crowd was less. Secondary data have been collected from websites, journals and articles.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

I. Demographic Profile of the Vendors

i. Profile of the vendors: Majority i.e., 58% of the street food vendors under study were in the age group of 30-40. About 95% of the respondents were male and 75% of the vendors were married. There were about 30% vendors who had migrated from Bihar 8-10 years ago to carry out vending activity in Assam.

ii. Educational level of the vendors: About 15% of the respondents were uneducated, 20% had studied till class 5, 35% studied till class 8, 20% had studied till class 10 and there were only 10% vendors who had qualification above class 10. These vendors possess low skills and low level of education required for better paid jobs.

iii. Family Status of the vendors: The families of vendors consist of dependent children, wife and 1-2 old members. Study revealed that about 70% of the respondents had 5-6 family members and 30% had more than 6 members. Out of these 75% of the respondents had 2-3 dependent children and 36% had 1 and 20% had 2 old dependent members. Besides, in most of the cases under study the respondents were the principle earner of the family.

II. Work Related Particulars

From the study it is evident that the street food vendors dealt in variety of items such as Fast food, Chana, Chat, Panipuri, Ice Cream and Fruit Juice. Table 1 reveals that 55% of the vendors had mobile business structure while 45% had fixed premises with temporary structure.

From the table it is evident that 45% vendors were engaged in this business for less than 10 years, there were 43% vendors who had been engaged in this business for 10-20 years, 7% vendors for 20-30 years and 5% have been doing this business since 30 years. Majority of these vendors worked all days of the week with varying working hours. 45% of the vendors worked for 5-6 hours a day, 30% worked for 7-8 hours and 25% vendors worked for more than 8 hours a day. Though these vendors worked for 7-8 hours a day and for 6-7 days a week but they could not afford a better living.

43% vendors did not have any helper in their workplace whereas 57% vendors employed helper in their workplace. Basically the fast food vendors require helpers to manage the customers and carry out the vending activity smoothly. In most of the cases they were helped by their brothers or cousins in their workplace.

Table 1: Work related information of street food vendors

Sl. No.	Particulars	Frequency	Percentage	
1.	Business structure	Mobile	55	55%
		Fixed premises with temporary structured	45	45%
2.	Years engaged in the business	Below 10 years	45	45%
		Between 10-20 years	43	43%
		Between 20-30	7	7%
		Above 30	5	5%
3.	Working hours	5-6 hours	45	45%
		7-8 hours	30	30%
		Above 8 hours	25	25%
4.	Days worked in a week	6 days	40	40%
		7 days	60	60%

5.	Persons engaged in the business	Nil	43	43%
		1-2 (excluding respondent)	57	57%
<i>Source: Field Survey, 2017</i>				

III. Monthly Income, Expenses and Savings of the Vendors

Table 2 shows the distribution of the vendors on the basis of monthly income, expenses and savings. From the table it is evident that 10% vendors had monthly income below Rs. 5000, 55% had income between Rs. 5000-10000 and 35% vendors earned Rs. 10000-15000 monthly. Regarding monthly expenses it was found that 25% vendors had monthly expenses between Rs. 3000-4000, 50% vendors had expenses between Rs. 4000-5000 and 25% vendors had expenses above Rs. 5000. Study also revealed that 20% respondents do not save any money, while 80% respondents saved money. Out of the respondents who saved money 63% reported that they save money on a monthly basis, whereas the rest 37% reported that they save money sometimes. About 35% of the respondents saved money in banks and post offices while 45% vendors preferred to save in SHG due to less complication.

From the study it can be concluded that although the vendors had to look after 5-6 family members and worked for 7-8 long hours on all days of the week but they did not earn enough to have a better living

Table 2: Distribution of vendors on the basis of monthly income, expenses and savings

Sl. No.	Particulars	Frequency	Percentage	
1.	Monthly Income	Below Rs. 5000	10	10%
		Between Rs.5000-10000	55	55%
		Between Rs. 10000-15000	35	35%
2.	Monthly Expenses	Between Rs. 3000-4000	25	25%
		Between Rs. 4000-5000	50	50%
		Rs. 5000 and above	25	25%
3.	Monthly Savings	Nil	20	20%
		Banks and Post Office	35	35%
		Self Help Groups (SHG)	45	45%
<i>Source: Field Survey, 2017</i>				

IV. Awareness about Schemes

The vendors under study possess low level of education and majority of the respondents in our study are unaware of social security bill. They do not have any **license** and are **not registered** in any government agency for conducting their business. Moreover, the respondents have not received any support from the government with regard to their business.

V. Problems Faced by Vendors

i. Harassment by Police: Sometimes police harass the vendors in the name of routine check. The most pressuring and ongoing risk for many street vendors is the possibility that local government authorities or

police will forcibly remove them from streets. The risk of displacement often increases in the context of elections, durga puja or efforts to beautify historic city centre.

ii. Extortion by local Goons: The vendors get harassed by local goons for money. Besides local goons different groups of local boys also harass them by asking huge amount starting from INR 500 to INR 1000 for celebrating local festivals like Bihu, Durga Puja and other local festivals. If the vendors dare to deny them they face physical harassment from them.

iii. Tax collector/Middleman: The vendors also face problem from the tax collector. They collect huge amount of tax from the vendors on daily or weekly basis and to minimize their loss they have to increase the rates of their items. Due to higher price customers demand curve slopes downwards and ultimately the vendors have to face loss in business.

iv. Health problems: As the vendors conduct their business for 7-8 long hours daily they also have to go through some health problems like asthma, malaria, dysentery, etc. Exposure in sun for long hours by some vendors, constant heat from stove burner faced by fast food sellers, mosquito and air pollution are some of the factors which affect the vendors health. Moreover, they use spray for controlling the germs and it may be another reason for their health problem.

v. Problems faced during rains: As the vendors do not have any permanent structure to conduct their business so they have to face problem at the times of rain.

4. Steps taken to protect the Street Vendors

In recent years, however, there has been an awakening of interest among policy-makers and academics on the one hand and a demand from unorganized sector workers on the other hand, for economic and social security. The courts in India as well as organizations of and for the street vendors assert that government cannot ignore the street vendors. Some of the initiatives undertaken to protect the street vendors are stated below:

i. NASVI: As a result of the efforts of organizations for the self-employed, a National Alliance of Street Vendors of India (known as **NASVI**) was formed, in 1998, to articulate the problems and demand the rights of vendors.

ii. National Policy: During the time of formation of NASVI, a call for 'do tokri ki Jagah' was taken up in Parliament when Ela Bhatt, founder of Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in Ahmadabad, moved a resolution in the Rajya Sabha on August 5, 1998 demanding the formulation of a National Policy

on Hawkers and Vendors and sought to improve their rights based on the framework proposed at the Bellagio Declaration (Labour File 1998a, 1998b).

A National Policy on street vendors was formulated by the government of India in 2004 as a result of the efforts of Ela Bhatt, founder of SEWA. This policy is aimed at providing and promoting a supportive environment to enable street vendors to earn a livelihood. It is also targeted towards ensuring the maintenance of the public spaces where these vendors sell these goods. Realizing that there is need for a revision of this policy, the government of India asked the NCUES to examine it and suggest such revisions as are necessary. On the basis of its report, a **new National Policy** on street vendors was formulated in 2009.

iii. Street Vendors Voice: In India, SEWA and NASVI have brought vendors voices to the National policy arena through legal and political strategies. SEWA and NASVI have used the courts in India to establish legal recognition of street vendors rights with the backing of Supreme Court.

iv. WEIGO: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WEIGO) is a global research policy network that aims to improve the status of the working poor, especially women in the informal economy through increased organization and social protection policies. It supports working poor women by aiming to ensure they have adequate information, knowledge and tools and can mobilize around their rights, enhancing their safety and their earnings. WEIGO does not set an agenda but rather support domestic workers, street vendors, waste pickers, garment workers, smallholder farmers and others in articulating their own demands and participating directly in policy and planning processes [7].

v. Street Vendors Act, 2014: The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014 which was introduced in the Lok Sabha on 6 September 2013 and by the Rajya Sabha on 19 February 2014 is a landmark for protection of this important section of the urban poor. The bill is an outcome of the consistent efforts of organizations such as SEWA and NASVI who have for over a decade been pressuring the government to grant legal recognition to street vendors [8].

Apart from these, there are several laws and regulations that directly affect the employment opportunities of vendors. In the unorganized sector, the problem is not that laws are inadequate, but the laws are not implemented. Inspection too is inadequate both to verify facts on the sites and to see whether the laws are being adhered to.

INITIATIVES IN ASSAM: In spite of policy being in place the level of implementation of this policy is a distant dream in some places. Assam government is yet to frame state rules on the basis of National Policy for Urban Vendors, 2004, which was revised later in 2009. In March 2012, street vendors in Assam with support from NASVI urged the state government of Assam to frame rules for implementing a National Policy undertaken by the centre for them in letter and spirit [9].

The major focus of NASVI has been to push for the implementation of the Street Vending Act 2014 across the states. NASVI has been meeting the concerned Ministers at the national level and also at the state level and has been writing to them for early and proper implementation of the Street Vending Act, 2014. In the state of Assam the Town Vending Committees (TVC) has been formed only in two cities i.e. Guwahati and Lakhimpur. Till now twelve vending zones have been created in Guwahati and out of the 7100 street vendors surveyed only 152 street vendors have received ID cards in Guwahati District [10].

5. CONCLUSION

In many cities and towns of India, street vending is a large source of employment and contributes significantly to household income. There is a substantial increase in the number of street vendors across the country. There are more than 3.1 million street traders across the country. Despite the efforts of the govt, the position of people engaged in this sector is far from satisfactory. Though there are adequate laws workers are usually unorganized and ignorant about their rights. Apart from a few organizations like Self Employed Women Association (SEWA), a trade union working primarily for women workers WEIGO, National Association of Street Vendors (NASVI) other trade unions and associations are usually nonexistent. In the unorganized sector, the problem is not that laws are inadequate, but the laws are not implemented. Inspection too is inadequate both to verify facts on the sites and to see whether the laws are being adhered to. In the present scenario, providing adequate means of livelihood as well as adequate social security to all the workers in the unorganized sector has become a challenge.

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