

Street-food Vending: From Precarious Existence to Social Inclusion

Case Stories from Bangalore¹

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Abstract

The paper explores street food vending in Bangalore, from the perspective of migration, inclusion and dignity of work. Food vending is one of the oldest and an important street vending activity. It is an important livelihood opportunity for the migrants, who are often one of most precarious groups in the urban informal economy. There are several factors for the same. Firstly, street food vending sector is relatively easy to enter and requires minimal skills. Secondly, food vending has strong cultural roots. This gives the migrants the opportunity to bring in their own culture in form of food, which gets immediate social acceptance. Hence there is a higher degree of social inclusion for the migrants. Thirdly, food as a sector is looked as a noble profession, thus associating dignity to the nature of work. The paper uses case stories of street food vendors in Bangalore, both migrants and non-migrants, and makes an attempt to understand their choice of this particular livelihood activity, the challenges that they face in navigating through the socio-political space of the urban informal economy and their perception about their 'work'. The paper finally comments on the Street Vending Act (SVA) and its effect on the street food vendors, especially the migrants, posing the question whether provisioning of legal space will reduce the precariousness of the migrants or would it add to the vulnerability to their already precarious existence.

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1. Introduction

Sarat Babu (name changed), a migrant from North Karnataka worked as a conductor in a private bus for 20 years, but decided to give up his job due to stress and deterioration of health. According to him,

I was stressed a lot. My health deteriorated due to lack of sleep. In civil bus, we have to obey our owners. Night journey, drunken passengers, lack of sleep stressed me in 20 years. in private bus service, we lack that (security) We do not have any benefits like PF or insurance.

While stress and lack of security pushed him to look for alternate livelihood options, his experience as a bus conductor helped him to become a street food vendor. He says

While I was driving, we had to eat outside. We were not getting food to eat at times and when we find a place to eat, had no time. In such circumstance we thought that why not let us serve good food to people and impress them. this is self-owned business. If we prefer we can work or else take off - during functions and other occasions.

It's been 6 months since he started a food stall with his wife's support.

This work has offered work to two of us in a family while earlier the whole family was dependent on my income.

Pinto, another young migrant from Jharkhand, came to Bangalore and worked as a cook for a few years. Eventually, he started a 'thela' selling the traditional food of Jharkhand, 'Litti Chokha'. With his business doing well he gradually added a few more carts and also opened a restaurant. However, this migrant from Bihar did not have it easy, as he had to go through the vagaries of the urban informal sector, navigating the issues of 'space' and negotiating with the rent seeking behavior of the authorities. Pinto feels that being a migrant made it even more challenging for him as the local vendors are able to manage the authorities better.

While these are narratives of a few street food vendors who were interviewed for this study, the issues and challenges face by them are resonated by most of the street food vendors, who often happen to be a migrant. Street food vending is one of the important form of street vending. According to Ministry of Urban Poverty Alleviation, street food vendors consist of 20% of the total street vendors in urban areas.

Street food is an important part of the urban socio-cultural infrastructure. It not only provides cheap and inexpensive food to people from different class, it also represents cultural assimilation and larger social acceptance of different kinds of food. The latter is highlighted by the fact that most of the street food vendors happen to be migrant, who often are involved in producing and selling food belonging to their own region.

While, setting up a street food cart is relatively inexpensive and requires minimal investment, which to a large extent explains the increasing number of migrants in this sector, the verities of urban informal sector, makes it challenging to sustain the livelihood activities. As any other street vendors, street food vendors are also susceptible to the harassment by the authorities, both police and government. Being on a mobile cart they constantly negotiate with the issue of space and constant fear of eviction and losing their livelihood. And for the migrants there is an added pressure of being an 'outsider'. The recent Street Vendors Act 2014, which is meant to provide identification and guarantee space to urban street vendors,

is in fact completely silent on the role of migrants in the street vending sector. The way the Act is playing out, it appears to be more exclusionary for the migrants.

The paper is situated in the context of Bangalore street food vending. It is estimated that Bangalore has around 2 lakhs – 3 lakhs street food vendors and the number is increasing. The paper is based on four case stories of street food vendors in Bangalore, two of whom are migrants, and aims to examine how street food vending provide means of inclusion into the society, especially for the migrants. How sustainable is the livelihood activity, given all the members of the household are involved in a single livelihood activity and how do the vendors navigate through the legal spaces of urban informal sector. And finally the paper tries to briefly comment upon the SVA and its probable effect on the migrant vendors, and question whether provisioning of a legal space will reduce the precariousness of the migrants or would it add to the vulnerability to their already precarious existence?

2. Background of the paper

2.1 Informal Economy

The discourse on informal sector is vast and often forms the basis of the discussions on migration, urbanization, poverty etc. One of the earliest studies which had a great influence on theorizing the emergence of an informal sector is Arthur Lewis's work on surplus labour (1954), which postulated migration of labour from the traditional subsistence farming sector to the modern industrial centers. This was followed by the Harris-Todaro model of development (1968) which brought in expectations in the model and suggested that the expected urban unskilled wages is often higher than the agricultural wages, which promotes rural-urban migration, thus adding to the urban unemployment and creation of a parallel economy, which is beyond the purview of any regulation. The term 'informal economy' was introduced in the literature by Hart (1973) who suggested that the surplus labour in the urban centers '*were not unemployed, but rather were positively employed, even if often for erratic and low returns*'. He contrasted this sector of 'informal income opportunities' with that of the formal economy, which is organized capitalism, and are recognized, and often regularized by the Government.

2.2 Defining Street Vending

Street vending is a significant part of the urban informal sector and generates livelihoods for more than 10 million people in India. Street hawkers, as street vendors are often called, are indispensable part of the urban economy. Running parallel to the organized urban trade, this sector has its own dynamics and a customer-base which is not restricted to only urban poor, but cuts across different social classes.

India's National Policy on Urban Street Vendors, 2009 and eventually Street Vendors Act, 2014 (SVA) are pioneering initiatives, aiming at protection of livelihood and regulating street vending. The National policy on Urban Street Vending, 2009 defines a street vendor as:

".. as a person who offers goods or services for sale to the public without having a permanent built up structure but with a temporary static structure or mobile stall (or headload). Street vendors may be stationary by occupying space on the pavements or other public/private areas, or may be mobile in

the sense that they move from place to place carrying their wares on push carts or in cycles or baskets on their heads, or may sell their wares in moving bus etc

One of the important limitations of SVA is that, in practice, the Town Vending Committee (TVA) that needs to be formed under the Act, often comprise of members of existing informal street vendors' unions. This in turn means, several street vendors, who often do not belong to any strong associations/unions, especially the migrants, may not get recognized. This increases their precariousness and makes them vulnerable to harassments from the administration and other authorities of power.

While there are several limitations of the Act, it did however recognize the importance of street vending as the backbone of any urban economy, and also aimed at providing 'urban space' to such a livelihood activity. The debate between public vs private space has been core to the discussion on street vendors. While vending on streets and pavements is seen as appropriation of public space for private economic gains, it is also seen as a space for mediation between the State and the society, and is an important 'physical capital' of the urban poor to extract their livelihoods (Brown, 2006).

2.3 Food Vending as a form of Street Vending

Selling food on street is one of the significant as well as oldest form of street vending activities. Given that 20% of all street vendors sell food, it surely is an important component of urban informal sector. The research on street food vending can be broadly put in three categories. One branch of studies focus on hygiene and safety conditions of street food, providing guidelines of operations, as well as advocating for security of the street food vendors. FAO(2007) examines different forms of street food vending – from street hawking to small semi-permanent eateries, and discusses several issues related to health and safety of consumers, safety and security of vendors and nutritional content of street food. Based on the research on Calcutta Street Food, as a part of an FAO project, Chakravarty (1996) provides specific operational guidelines for improving the hygiene and nutrition of street food in Calcutta, which is also included in the Indian Bureau of Standards. Chakravarty (2015) emphasizes the role of awareness and motivation among the street food vendors to improve the standard of food provided on streets.

The second branch looks at how street food addresses the issue of urban food security. Irrepressible urbanization creates immense challenge for the State to address the issue of urban poverty. While State-led poverty alleviation program have shown effects in the rural areas, urban poor, mostly involved in the informal sector, continue to remain out of the policy purview in the most vulnerable state. Research have shown that street food in fact address the issue of urban food security in a significant way (Tinker, 1997; Tinker, 2003). Street food is inexpensive and often made of fresh ingredients and hence satisfies the nutrition level. Given its accessibility and affordability it becomes an important source of nutrition for the urban poor. Wipper and Dittrich (2007) proves the above point with action research conducted with Hyderabad street food vendors. Patel et.al (2013), show similar findings for Madurai in Tamil Nadu where the millet porridge sold by the street food vendors is a staple diet of the urban poor.

The third branch of studies on street food vending focus primarily on the issue of access to urban space, the contestation between the street vendors and the state authorities. Eztold (2013) explains street vending as a social and spatial practice which gets into the contestation of formal and informal modes of governing public places in Dhaka. He also explains how a migrant street vendor has different kinds of

challenges and they use translocal social capital and home bound identities to gain access to the urban local markets (Eztold, 2014)

Apart from the usual informal economy arguments of street vending, food vending as a livelihood activity also has roots in culture (Bhattacharya, 1997) and occupies a discernible position in the discussion on dignity of work. Street food vending is not a homogenous activity. Since there is a significant presence of migrants in the street food vending sector, they bring in different kinds of food and culture from different places. This differentiates street food vending from other street vending activities and makes it interesting to study.

2.4 Focus of the Paper

This research is a part of a larger study done on Bangalore Livelihoods, specifically in the informal sector. The paper is based on the exploratory study being carried out on the street food vendors in Bangalore. The paper presents some initial findings from the pilot interviews done with street food vendors in specific locations of Bangalore, understanding their livelihood choice, the challenges that they face in sustaining their livelihood and their perception about the nature and inclusion of their livelihood. The respondents chosen represent both migrant as well as non-migrant individuals and households, which enables us to compare the differences in challenges faced by both these groups.

Street vending as a livelihood activity is mostly chosen by the migrants, who are often the marginalized and the most precarious group in the urban informal sector. Through street food vending the migrants bring in their traditions and culture in form of food in the host region. This also gives them a greater chance of getting assimilated into the larger cultural tapestry of the host region, thus providing them higher degree of social inclusion. Such inclusiveness in the society is brought about by the fact that selling food has always been looked as a noble profession and thus there is a sense of dignity associated with the same.

Another important characteristic of street food vending in the role of social networks. The role of social networks in migration and social inclusion is well studied. There is a significant role of social networks in getting access as well as day to day operation of the livelihood activity. While getting access largely depends on the local social capital, through friends or relative; the day-to-day practice of the activity largely depends on the contribution of family members. In many cases, street-food vending is a household activity, and not an individual activity. Which essentially means that every member of the family contributes towards the operation of the activity. And such family commitment is necessary for the sustenance of the activity.

While a lot has been studied about the vulnerability of the street food vendors and politics of space, not much has been explored about the issue of inclusion and dignity. The paper focuses on the latter and examines how selling food is enabling the migrants to become a part of the socio-cultural framework of the city and then raises certain question on the policy on Street vendors, asking whether such a policy will include or further exclude the already precarious group.

The paper is based on interviews with four street food vendors, two of whom are migrants, however had migrated more than 10 years ago. While the case studies are given at the end of the chapters, some of the narratives of the case studies are examined with the lens of precariousness and social inclusion.

3. Street Food Vendors – The Precarious Existence

The vulnerability of the food vendors is captured by looking at their reasons to take up this particular livelihood activity, the day-to-day harassment that they have to face from the authorities and the lack of diversity in the household's livelihood activity since all the household members are involved in one livelihood activity.

All the respondents had transitioned from a different livelihood activity to street food vending, and for most of them the transition was voluntary, as their previous jobs were exploitative and lacked personal freedom. Hence all the respondents felt more secured in their current livelihood of street food vending.

While the respondents chose street food vending over any other informal sector work to have a sense of ownership and freedom of work, all the respondents faced harassment from police and other government authorities on a regular basis.

..... I came across several problems, I had to pay police; in spite of that they used to trouble me; subordinate policemen also used to demand money and torture me; then people used to tell me not to park my cart here.....

..... police who visit every day, I had to pay 10 or 20 rs. Almost 3000 out of my pocket was given away to police. Once the issue with police sorted out, traffic police started creating problem. Traffic inspector used to come and throw out me, sometimes they take away my cylinder, at times throw water on the stove; throw oil away, throw table and chair in front of customers. He got setting done with traffic police as well. I gave them 5000 rs. Then that problem was solved but BBMP came into picture. He spoke to BBMP and sorted it out. In this way till three and half months passed by. But finally traffic police again came in and created problem.

The migrants had an added challenge of being an 'outsider'.

When I am heading back from market with the stock, police will stop me. Once I get relieved from them, I find issues at the place of vending; some customers who come to me ... make an issue and fight by saying that they ordered some other chat. We come across many such small issues from morning till night; one has to manage such issues. If I rise my voice, they threaten me saying I will be evicted from here; one has to face lot of such problems.

Because local people have more value. Like I am paying them 5000, they might be paying 2000 or 10,000, never know. So, they are valued more as they are local.

By now I had realized that if I have to do business here I have to be with localites, if not I won't be able to do. If I use my own stall again same problem would arise.

Another reality that the street food vendors face is that often this is a household level livelihood activity, i.e., all the members of the households are involved in the same activity of food vending. In the rural sector diversification of livelihood is one of the important strategies of the household to cope with risks and shocks. Even in the urban informal sector often the household members are observed to be involved in different livelihood activities. However, street food vending requires the input from all the members of household and often not only the household members but also next of kin get involved in the particular

activity. Such lack of diversification may make these households more prone to risks and shocks. Deteriorating health condition of any household member or loss of job could result in failure of livelihood for the entire household.

4. Vending Food – Dignity and Social Inclusion

In spite of facing challenges from the authorities and the ‘locals’, all the respondent equivocally agreed that they were doing much better, both economically and socially, once they transitioned to street food vending. One of the respondents felt that street food vending not just gives them the ownership of their livelihood, but also it is a dignified livelihood to serve food to people.

We feel happy that we are serving food to people. People express satisfaction of having food when they come to us hungry. It's great to serve food to people. This provide us food (earnings) and fill others too. This is a good job. It's a sacred job..... as we are doing this work on our own, we don't have to worry about anyone. It's nice to run a self-owned business and serving food to people. People liking our food makes us feel good.

Even though the vendors are part of the urban informal network, the nature of their livelihood activity gives them a sense of dignity.

..... in chat vending my life has been good. People who see me might think I work on street but I am almost equal to a software engineer; I can say so.....

All the respondents mentioned that their customers range from poor and non-poor background, migrants as well as locals. From the narratives it was never felt that their food was discriminated against or neglected. Hence this indicates the acceptance of the larger society of different types of food. Both for the migrant as well as non-migrant vendor, acceptability was similar. This highlights the role of ‘food’ which help the migrants get included in the society.

5. Stories from the field

Case Story 1: Street food vending as sacred and dignified work.

Ram and Lakshmi (names changed), a young couple in their early thirties sell food items such as Chinese egg fried rice, noodles, gobi manchurian etc from a mobile food cart near one of the malls on the busy Bannerghatta road. They have strategically placed themselves there to capitalize on the high pedestrian footfalls and potential customers including office employees working in many software companies, shoppers, cab drivers and school children. They live 4kms away from the place where they sell street food.

Ram and Lakshmi's day starts early in the morning with Ram going to the market once in two days to buy vegetables. He owns an auto which the couple use to transport vegetables from the market and utensils, vegetables, water etc. required to cook and operate the food stall. Lakshmi cleans and chops vegetables, cooks rice and noodles and prepares for evening sales with Ram's help and at times with help from her mother, mother-in-law and sisters. They work for 10 hours from 2:00 PM to 12:00 AM at the food cart, reaching home after cleaning the vessels and locking the cart. The cart along with some utensils are left locked on the road. On a typical day, they sell around 100 plates of rice or noodles. While at the stall, Ram

mixes the right ingredients and make dishes, and Lakshmi sets plates ready to serve by placing a banana leaf over it. Ram says

My hands pain but we forget our stress while at work. People who work at hotel drink and go to sleep in the night. But we believe in god.

The couple decided to start street food vending 4 years back as a way out to start working independently. Ram is from Chidambaram but took up driving work in Bangalore that offered him better pay than in Chidambaram. He switched to different travel companies as he was unhappy due to humiliation and insults that he went through as driver. Lakshmi worked as a cook for 10 years in one of the many apartment buildings on Bannerghatta Road. The couple went through a difficult time when their child was hospitalized and was in ICU for nearly two months. Ram could not get leave from his work easily to be with his family in times of need. He often felt that he was not treated with dignity and was humiliated and not having the flexibility to visit his child in the hospital pushed him to quit his job. Eventually, the couple lost their child in spite of spending two lakhs on hospitalization.

While he (Ram) was working as a driver, our kid was at ICU and we were required to take counselling. But he was not getting any leaves. One or two days can be managed but our kid was in ICU for two and half months. They don't understand our problems. In such circumstance, my husband was hurt and he decided to start a business on his own. We can take off when required in a self-owned work.

Having decided to quit his job, Ram wanted to start street food vending as he felt that there was a dearth of places offering affordable food to the working class people. Given Lakshmi's experience as a cook, low investment and proximity of the location to their home, they ventured into street food vending. As a result, Lakshmi, had to discontinue her work and join her husband in food vending. She said, even though she was happy working as a cook, she enjoys being a street food vendor better.

We wanted to do something that everyone would be interested in and also works out easier for us. So we chose this.....

We feel happy that we are serving food to people. People express satisfaction of having food when they come to us hungry. It's great to serve food to people. This provide us food (earnings) and fill others too. This is a good job. It's a sacred job..... as we are doing this work on our own, we don't have to worry about anyone. It's nice to run a self-owned business and serving food to people. People liking our food makes us feel good.

Lakshmi initially had reservations about staying at the vending location till late in the night but this soon faded away as she has not faced any problems or harassment from anyone.

In the beginning I was hesitant about this. Was worried about standing in front of the cart. But now I feel completely comfortable.

The couple are no exceptions to have faced harassments by police and ULB which they manage by paying bribes to authorities given the commercial significance of the location where they vend.

The couple's case explains that while competition among fellow vendors causes certain constraints to their work, the collaboration among themselves can build an informal support system in resolving issues at work. For instance, they have had hard experiences with a dosa vendor as he was unhappy about losing customers to the couple when they opened the stall. Recalling another instance, husband says " We have good understanding between fellow vendors. We are together with Pav bhaji and dosa vendors. If a new vendor comes, we request them not to vend here and explain them how it will disturb our business".

Ram's story is one that we have encountered often – private sector employment with low pay, long working hours and high vulnerability. In spite of many constraints, stress and threats they intend to continue being street food vendors as they feel that the work is independent and doesn't hurt their self-respect, is flexible and gives them satisfaction. They think a food cart is more viable than running a restaurant considering the huge investment required for a restaurant. Lakshmi is happy with street food vending to an extent that she encourages her sisters who are currently studying to take up street food vending.

Case Story 2: Street food vending as a viable alternative to uncertain, low paying jobs

Narendra (name changed) aged 31, sells around 30 varieties of chats in Jayanagar, one of the prime locations of Bangalore city. After his PUC, he could not enroll for higher studies due to his family's financial problems. He moved from Mandya district to Bangalore 17 years back and worked for 3 years in factory that manufactures dry cell battery components. He was one among 200 employees of the factory who lost their jobs when the factory automated and brought in a machine from Germany. Having no job and no place to live, he stayed with his cousin who is a chat vendor and started looking for a job. After unsuccessful attempts to secure a job, Narendra decided to help his cousin in his chat vending work as a way of expressing his gratitude and to repay him for the food and accommodation provided. Within 6 months, he learnt how to make chats and manage a stall. Eventually he developed interest for chat making and decided not to look other jobs. He chose chat vending as his livelihood and has been a street food vendor for last 14 years. Interestingly, Narendra also worked as an actor for 4 years in a few TV serials along with working as a street food vendor, but left it as he did not find work often and the work was not remunerative. In addition, he was expected to pay others who have helped him get auditions and roles.

I was paid 900 or 1200 per day. But I didn't find it useful so I discontinued and switched to this. By then 7 years were passed by and I also got married with which responsibilities increased and hence I was not able to travel outside much. Also to take care of a family and children I needed more money and hence I devoted whole time in this (chat vending).

Narendra's day as a chat vendor starts at around 10.00 AM with buying vegetables, groceries and other ready-to-eat food items from the market. Narendra's wife helps him in cleaning and chopping the vegetables and preparing these items for sale. He is at his stall for 6 hours from 4.30 PM to 11.00 PM. He is able to manage his family of four with the income and feels it unnecessary for his wife to take up full time employment– he only wants her to help him and lead an easy life. He says:

This stall requires two members. At home, she cleans coriander, banana leaf, keeps carrot and onion ready and other things she does. And we have no financial problem, no money issues and hence even I have not let her work and won't let her work either. Let her just help me and want her to be aram.

Narendra faced competition from fellow vendors one of whom opened a shop close by after seeing Narendra's success.

People who have switched from other work suddenly to this have tried vending on the same road. Thinking that he (Narendra) is doing well and so we may also do well. People have tried a lot but have failed. In some instance, such people without having customers they have incurred loss and so have left as they were unsuccessful.

A dry chat shop was started by someone once I started vending in this road. He said, I have opened a shop you should vacate. I am paying rent but you don't pay. You need to vacate or else I know how to get your stall removed.

Narendra's friends intervened and helped him even during fights. Apart from competition, he also faced pressures from BBMP and police.

I had to pay police; in spite of that they used to trouble me; subordinate policemen also used to demand money...their intention is not to remove us from here. They need something and hence they use this as a excuse to make money. Once paid they have no objection. If we pay more or less what they demand, we will not have any problem.

Such demands appear to be quite frequent and from different people.

The one (police) who comes every day are different from the one who collects weekly; two weeks once are again different and who collect monthly once are different.... People from BBMP used to come earlier. I used to pay. Now old one has retired and new one doesn't seek as I know him. So I have no issues from BBMP. Even I don't litter the place. I clean everything in the night before leaving; I broom the place neatly; I don't let any garbage to remain; I have kept the place cleanly.

In spite of all this, Narendra feels that being an entrepreneur and starting something on one's own is better than working for someone else and being humiliated all the time. By ensuring the taste and hygiene of the food products that he sells, he has built a clientele for himself among whom he counts celebrities and VIPs.

If we work for someone else, have to tolerate all humiliation, have to reach the target said; even when we work hard, all the profit goes to owner we just get monthly payment and we have to live within that (a dudalle circle hakond badhukbekaguthe). Instead if we start a business on our own, maintaining hygiene and taste and offered to customers, definitely they recognize it. Many cinema artists visit me, many VVIPs visit me in Benz, Audi, BMW and Jaguar cars; they order and come back to collect it after 10 mins. I feel happy that they encourage us. If we work hard we can earn well; well in the sense not too much but if worked very hard from morning till night, one can shape one's life well.

Narendra's case also underlines the role of networks in the choice as well as ease of entry into a particular livelihood activity. He was helped by his cousin when he lost his job and he in turn introduced 7 to 8 friends to chat vending who earlier worked as auto drivers, puffed rice vendor, associate in catering business and the one who worked in a printing press. He has taught them to make chats and provided financial assistance as well to buy a cart. He says those whom he introduced are doing well once they started chat vending.

But the other side of the story is the risks and vulnerability associated with street food vending. Narendra has been vulnerable to harassment from police and BBMP authorities. He was threatened by a shopkeeper of a chat center which he confronted with the help of his friends working as street food vendors. He says

I came across several problems. I had to pay police, in spite of that they used to trouble me. Subordinate policemen also used to demand money and torture me.

He is not keen on his children taking up street vending.

I won't give this pain to my children. I have struggled a lot. I am educating my children, I have made them study in English medium.

Narendra mentioned that a few of his friends started avoiding him after he took up street food vending.

Society might say I am a street food vendor, friends avoid me, one make remarks at you by looking at what you wear outside but no one actually know your hunger. People who see me might think I work on street but I am almost equal to a software engineer; I can say so.

Case Story 3: The journey of a young boy from child labour to street food vending to restaurant owner

Pinto (name changed), who migrated to Bangalore from a village in Jharkand, sells Bihar's famous snack Litti-Chokha in a busy locality known for its young migrant population. Pinto's father was a drunkard who lost his job as a driver because of his drinking habit and his mother worked as a maid to support the family. When Pinto was nine years old, his father found a job for him as a domestic servant in the house of a manager in the coal field in one of the villages in Jharkhand. Later he moved with his employer to Chhattisgarh and worked there for five years.

Recalling the hardship he went through as a child labourer Pinto says

Saab's (Manager's) son used to fight with me on small issues. He was younger than me but often used to hit me with bat.. I worked from 4 in the morning till 10 in the night. Housekeeping work, like cleaning house - sweeping, mopping and other work that I was supposed to do. For more than 3 to 4 years I couldn't go home and meet my mother, father and sister...

Pinto was not aware that his father had borrowed Rs 10,000 from the manager for his sister's marriage and had left Pinto in the manager's house to repay the loan through his labour. When the young boy asked the manger if he can go home, he was told

'How can you go home? Your parents have borrowed money from me; they have sold you to me. I pay you Rs. 250 per month'. I was stunned to hear this.

After an unsuccessful attempt to run away from his employer's house, Pinto managed to run away and was eventually rescued by an MLA and was sent back to his village. After working for a few months in low paying jobs, Pinto came to Bangalore with one of his neighbours from the village. The neighbor worked as a cook and found Pinto a job to cook cum housekeeper for four bachelors. Eventually, he started working as a cook in five other households introduced by his first employers.

But Pinto was keen to work independently and start a small restaurant in partnership with a friend from Bihar. However, given the high rentals and deposits and the duress under which his family was, he decided to start a 'thela' (street food cart) which involved significantly lower investment. He borrowed money from his employers to start his own business selling litti-chokha, samosas and other snacks. He chose a lane in one of the busy areas in the city which is now an abode of young migrants and hub of street foods. He initially managed the stall with his father's help while continuing to work as a cook and domestic help.

Despite his hard work and enthusiasm, it wasn't an easy task for him to be a street food entrepreneur. On his very first day as a street vendor, he had to pay a bribe to a police man before he could sell a single item from his cart. He was harassed by BBMP, cops and traffic police of different ranks routinely and threatened by other shopkeepers.

However, a local businessman who watched him vend every day was impressed with his hard work. He had contacts with local police and BBMP, and supported Pinto by speaking to local cops and got the permission for him to vend on a condition that Pinto should pay Rs. 1500 to them every month, which would be a significant portion of his income. This however, did not put an end to harassment.

Traffic inspector used to come and throw me out, sometimes they take away my cylinder, at times throw water on the stove; throw oil away, throw table and chair in front of customers.

The bribes he had to pay to protect his livelihood increased to Rs. 5,000 per month. Then the harassment from BBMP started. The local businessman once again intervened and 'settled' the matters with BBMP.

In this way till three and half months passed by. But finally traffic police again came in and created problem.... I went with my uncle to police station and spoke to single starred and double starred police. The money which I kept paying was shared with double starred police but not with triple starred police. They asked me why you didn't pay us and only them.

Navigating through the layers of authority and negotiating with them proves to be a challenge for migrants such as Pinto who feels that local vendors are able to manage better.

Because local people have more value. Those owner of hotel or bakery might be paying (khilaraha hoga) police. Like I am paying them 5000, even they might be paying 2000 or 10,000, never know. So, they are valued more as they are local. Taking my case as excuse they were troubling other stalls also. Every stalls had similar issues but it was much more over me.

Due to such instances in which authorities and policemen behaved with vested interests, he thought that building contacts with local vendors is imperative for a migrant street vendor to survive. Using this strategy he took a cart on rent for Rs. 7500 from a non-migrant who ran a restaurant in the city, with an informal agreement that the owner of the cart will deal with police and other authorities if questioned or harassed and Pinto himself would still pay the local cops. He says

Now including cart rent, bribes paid to local cops, traffic police, BBMP and others I have to pay nearly 15,000 to 17,000 per month.

Out of these expenses 10,000 is the rent and the rest is paid as bribe.

With the experience and confidence he gained from managing a street food cart, he started two more such litti-choka stalls in different locations, managed by his relative and a friend from his village.

Pinto's business expansion didn't stop here, he planned to start a restaurant. He arranged an investment of Rs 10,00,000 by borrowing it from private moneylenders and he says "I have good credit in the market". He says he has got all the license from BBMP required to run a restaurant and would like to take up catering further. His father manages the restaurant while Pinto manages one of the 3 litti-chokha carts. He has hired 10-12 workers from Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and from his own village in Kharkand for his restaurant. Even though he is able to earn more from the food carts than the restaurant and in fact he manages the restaurant with his income from the food carts, he is hopeful that one day near in future the restaurant would do well. He says

I am running this restaurant because this has become my proper address now, ये मेरा उचित पता हो गया. On papers I have a restaurant in my name now.

He would like to invest his earnings in providing good education to his brother and says

If my brother get a good position and If I happen to fail in my business, then my brother through his job can push us up. So it is necessary for one or two members to be in a different sector.

The inspiring, exuberant young street food entrepreneur earning a monthly profit of Rs 30,000 says that today they have a house to live in their village and is hopeful about his future ahead.

Case Story 4: Migration and street food vending as a livelihood option for middle class households as well

Sarat Babu (name changed) and his wife, a couple from one of the villages in North Karnataka are new entrants to street food vending. They park their mini-van which they use for vending food near an ancient temple in Bangalore. Their menu includes idli, dosa, lemon rice, puliyogre and paddu for breakfast that's available between 7.30 am to 12.00 pm and chapatti, ragi mudde, rice, rasam and butter milk for lunch available till 4.30 pm. Chapathi, idli, dosa and ragi mudde are made at the location while others food items are cooked at home.

Sarat Babu who worked as a conductor in a private bus for 20 years decided to give up his job due as it was stressful and his health deteriorated. According to him,

I was stressed a lot. My health deteriorated due to lack of sleep. In civil bus, we have to obey our owners. Night journey, drunken passengers, lack of sleep stressed me in 20 years. I started getting back pain. Now I can't stand for long time....In civil (private) buses, owners are not at risk. In civil bus we conductors and drivers have our own risks. We have to convince passengers. In BMTC and KSRTC, workers have security. But in private bus service, we lack that....We do not have any benefits like PF or insurance. We were paid daily wages... In that job, we had to work under someone. Even if we are asked to come at night 12, we have to go because we are afraid of getting fired or not receiving enough work. But this is self-owned business. If we prefer we can work or else take off - during functions and other occasions.

His family of five was fragmented as his two children were studying in different cities and his wife along with her mother-in-law lived in the village. The village is drought affected leaving the residents with less or no job opportunities other than agriculture. He moved with his family to Bangalore where his son is pursuing engineering.

We could have started some business in the village but no rains there. It is difficult to live in those villagers. It's very difficult to lead a life there. People from higher and lower class can somehow manage but it is difficult for middle class.... In cities people can get work for all 365 days but in village people have no consistent jobs. May not have work for a week or 15 days. We will not be able to afford to get higher education to our children by working in village. At least by living here we will be able to cut down travelling costs. If not we have to put them in PG and pay rent. But now I can use the same money to pay the rent for this house.

While stress and lack of security pushed him to look for alternate livelihood options, his experience as a bus conductor helped him to become a street food vendor. He says

While I was driving, we had to eat outside. Developed acidity by eating food mixed with soda. We were not getting food to eat at times and when we find a place to eat, had no time. In such circumstance we thought that why not let us serve good food to people and impress them. So we started this.

It's been 6 months since he started a food stall with his wife's support. They start their work every day at 4 am and closes it around 11.30 pm, making it a hectic and tough job for the family, having hardly any time to rest in between. Sarat Babu says

This work has offered work to two of us in a family while earlier the whole family was dependent on my income.

His wife agree with him and adds

I was bored to be at home. I felt the need of a having a job. It is boring to just cook, eat and stay at home. Now I feel good that I am working.

Even though she has to manage all chores at home, cook food for customers and manage the cart with her husband, she feels it okay to have an extra pressure than being at home. The couple are able to manage different expenses such as rent, vehicle loan, salary of a helper and children education fees with their income.

Deciding on a place to vend was not easy. Being new to Bangalore and not having any support here, Sarat Babu and his wife did not want to antagonize established vendors by setting up a food cart in competition with them. So they looked for a place which was unoccupied, yet has enough footfalls to sustain their business.

I searched in this whole area. In Bangalore, parking is a main problem. Even if one parks in a place for more than 5 mins, people start honking. People can't park in front hotels and in most places, one has to pay to park, or else if you park on the sides of the road, police will create a problem. The location where I vend now is free of such problems and hence I found it right place for me to start.

Sarat Babu had to contact and convince the temple authorities that he will not litter the place or sell non-vegetarian food or bother the visitors to the temple in any other way. They pay a rent of Rs. 1000 to the temple management for having permission to vend on a footpath that leads to the temple. This explains the probable role played by such institutions in a life of street food vendors. They count cab drivers, construction workers, police and other officials and families living nearby among their clients.

Networks have been important to them in different situations. A relative who lives in Bangalore has been helpful in finding the house to stay as the family, in selecting a right place to park the cart while vending and in arranging loan for the mini-van. The relative also helped resolve issues with police.

They avoid closing the stall for more than a day worrying that they may lose customers. For them focusing on their customer's satisfaction seems to be tough task than dealing with other issues as they are new vendors. Though they mentioned that they had issues with police initially, they were reluctant to explain or speak about it further. Being new to street vending, they are not aware of the SVA, street vendor unions or of the street vendors surveys proposed to be carried out. Sarat Babu aspires to open a restaurant in future.

6. Conclusion

While the four vendors considered for the study have distinct reasons for transitioning into the livelihood of street food vending, we can immediately draw threads which connect each of them. All of them are in a constant contestation with the authorities in negotiating the issue of urban space. Even the respondents who have migrated more than 10 years ago are still considered outsiders and face added challenges, especially from the local customers. However, it appears that such negotiations and contestation have become a part of their daily lives, which they have to navigate through every day. The interesting point is

that in spite for such harassment, all the respondents were satisfied with their livelihood and some of them even aspire to expand.

This sense of security and sustainability for each of the vendors emerges from the fact that their provisioning of food is accepted by the larger section of the society. This makes the street food vending sector interesting that the vendors are not discriminated against their caste, class or migration status. It is only the quality of food and general acceptability of the food that makes them sustain. Hence street food vending provides a relatively easy channel for the migrants to get included into the host society.

However, the current regulation related to street vending, the Street Vending Act, 2014 (SVA), poses threat to such inclusions. The larger objective of the Act is to provide the street vendors identity and regularized urban space, in order to reduce the contestation of the vendors over space. Apart from right to space, the Act gives them the permission to cook food on the street, which currently is restricted to only assembling pre-cooked food on street.

However, the Act does not have any provision for including the migrant street vendors within its purview. The Act, requires representation of street vendors in the vending committee, which also has representation from the municipal authorities. This representation of street vendors are of local vendors. Hence it is the local vendors who get the identity and right to space, and the migrants continue to work in the periphery. This makes them even more prone to exploitation from the authorities as well as fellow vendors who now have a right to space.

Thus while the street food vendor uses the 'food' for inclusion into the society, implementation of SVA might work in an opposite direction in increasing the exclusion of the migrant vendor through legal spaces. Given that a majority of street food vendor in any urban area are migrants, the success of the SVA will depend on how the Act can be implemented to allow for representation of migrants in the street vending sector.

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