

24th August 2017, 9:30 to 11 am

Panel 2: Identity and Inclusion

(Discussant: Sudeep Basu, Chair: Pradeep Bose)

Street-food Vending: From Precarious Existence to Social Inclusion Case Stories from Bangalore

Annapurna Neti, & Puja Guha Assistant Professor, Azim Premji University, Bangalore

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.

1. Background of the paper

1.1 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.

1.2 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. 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. Apart from the usual informal economy arguments of street vending, food vending as a livelihood activity also has roots in culture 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.

2.1 What makes food vending interesting?

Like most of the other informal sector livelihoods, street food vending is also easy to enter, with requirement of minimum level of skills and very little capital investment; and also easy to operate. One of the important characteristics of street food vending is that it provides opportunities to the migrants and other minority social castes, who are often socio-economically disadvantaged and are the most precarious group. Such inclusiveness in the livelihood activity is brought about by two factors; firstly, selling food has always been looked as a noble profession, and often has a degree of dignity associated with it. Secondly, food having a strong cultural connection, gives flexibility to the vendor of bringing in the cultural connection in food.

Another important characteristic of street food vending is 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.

2.2 Issues of inclusion and dignity

Street vending as a livelihood activity is mostly chosen by the migrants, who are often the marginalized and precarious group. Hence the issues related to providing for a better workplace, decent living and inclusion of these people in the society has been the center of discussion in the informality domain. In case of street food vending, the focus has primarily being on the hygiene and quality of street food, which in some sense assures proper working conditions. Issues related to inclusion and dignity have not been explored as much for the street food vendors.

Food vending is quite heterogeneous in nature given the strong presence of migrants in this sector. It gives migrants an opportunity to retain their own cultural identity and introduce their own culture in the form of food to the host region. This gives migrants a greater chance of getting assimilated into the larger cultural tapestry of the host region, thus providing them higher degree of social inclusion.

3. Objective of the paper

The broad objectives of the paper are as follows:

- Examining street food vending as a sustainable livelihood activity and means of inclusion into the society, especially for migrants, in Bangalore
- Understanding how migrants navigate through the legal spaces of food vending and utilize their networks in doing so.
- Critically examine and briefly comment on the SVA (yet to be implemented in Bangalore), in terms of possibility of inclusion of the migrants street food vendors in the larger society.

4. Methodology of the study

The paper is an exploratory study of street food vending in Bangalore. The research is based on in-depth interviews 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.

The research will also draw inferences from interviews with legal experts to understand the implementation of SVA in Bangalore and the effect it might have on the existing street food vendors in Bangalore. 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.

References

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