

Unfolding The Impact of Pandemic on Socio-Economic Life of Kolkata Street Food Vendors

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Abstract

The global repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic have caused substantial adverse effects worldwide, particularly affecting street vendors in developing nations, including India. This paper specifically investigates the impact of the pandemic on street food vendors in Kolkata since they lacked the skills and resources to overcome shocks. The goal is to understand the demographic characteristics of these vendors, examine the socio-economic challenges faced during and post lockdown, and analyse their coping strategies and mitigation measures in response to these adverse effects.

Keywords: Street Food, Kolkata, COVID-19 Pandemic, Hygiene, Digital Integration

INTRODUCTION

Informal Street Vending refers to the production and sale of legal goods and services in urban public spaces, without official regulation. The exact global number of street vendors is unknown, but regional statistics highlight the significant presence of street vending in specific developing countries. Street vendors, or hawkers, are integral to the informal economy as self-employed entrepreneurs dealing in legal goods and services. Operating through mobile or fixed setups in public or private spaces, they often bypass formal regulations. In urban economies, especially in developing countries like India, street vending is a vital part of small and medium-scale enterprises, providing essential goods and services conveniently and affordably. This sector significantly contributes to employment and income.

Street food vendors form a distinct subset of street vendors, drawing interest due to their low skill and capital requirements. These individuals or small businesses operate food stalls or carts in public spaces, usually on urban streets or sidewalks. They prepare and sell a variety of ready-to-eat or freshly cooked food items, offering a diverse range of culinary choices, from local specialties and snacks to beverages and complete meals.

Catering to pedestrians, commuters, and residents, street food vendors provide convenient and affordable food options in lively urban settings. Street vending, particularly in the form of street food, serves as a vital income source for rural migrants and impoverished urban residents.

Despite economic benefits, it faces criticism for issues like traffic disruptions, hygiene concerns, lack of knowledge about food-borne diseases and encroachment on land. Municipal authorities often subject street food vendors to harassment.

The COVID-19 pandemic, resulting from the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, has deeply affected societies and economies worldwide, impacting businesses of all scales. Street vendors, heavily dependent on daily sales,

have been particularly hard-hit, facing challenges in accessing government support and financial aid. This has created difficulties for them in recovering from the losses incurred during the pandemic. Street food vendors play a crucial role in Kolkata's vibrant culinary scene, offering a diverse array of delicious foods enjoyed by both locals and tourists. This essay explores the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the street food vendors in Kolkata. The study aims to illuminate the challenges faced by street food vendors in Kolkata due to pandemic-related restrictions and reduced foot traffic. It underscores the unique hurdles in accessing government support and financial assistance, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to recognize and support the contributions of street vendors, particularly in the context of local economies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bhattacharya, Dey, and Sammadar's (2023) Kolkata-based study revealed a significant decline in consumer traffic, leading to financial instability, and highlighted the heightened health challenges faced by street food vendors. Despite obstacles, their adaptability was evident through government and non-governmental support.

The study of **Elangovan et al. (2023)** in East Bangalore focused on the challenges faced by street food vendors during the lockdown, providing localized insights into their experiences, responses, and post-lockdown customer dynamics.

Arunsreevatsan and Poornima (2023) in their research on Coimbatore aimed to understand the challenges, coping mechanisms, and social implications of the pandemic on street vendors, utilizing a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Chakravarty (1996) proposed measures for health and sector improvement, emphasizing legal aspects, food safety, and socio-economics in Kolkata city. It advocated for licensing vendors and municipal control, fostering collaboration between authorities and vendors.

Sezgin and Şanlıer (2016) through descriptive research highlighted issues of poor hygiene and the lack of food safety knowledge among street food sellers, emphasizing the need for educational programs and improved hygiene conditions.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. Determining street food pockets of Kolkata city based on variety and investigating the socio-demographic characteristics of street food vendors in Kolkata.
2. Evaluating the sanitary conditions and hygiene practices during the preparation and sale of street foods.
3. Examining the socio-economic challenges faced by these vendors during and after the lockdown due to the COVID-19 disease outbreak and resultant coping strategies resorted to.

POCKETS OF INTERESTS

1. Burra Bazar: A culinary haven in Central North Kolkata, West Bengal, renowned for its Marwari cuisines, offering crispy kachoris, Mirchi Vadas, and Rajasthani thalis.
2. Dacres Lane: A historic street food hub in Kolkata's office para, dating back over 200 years, known for Chittobabu's Doka's chicken stew, ghugni, and diverse options, including Chinese, North Indian, and comforting rice plates.

3. Jadavpur: A southern Kolkata neighborhood, home to prestigious institutions and a variety of street food options, including kochuris, samosas, momos, dosas, and Bengali specialties.
4. Tirreti Bazar: India's First Chinatown, near Lalbazar in Central Kolkata, known for Chinese breakfast delights, momos, wantons, pork chops, soups and zung.

Vivekananda Park: Located in Southern Avenue, a serene neighbourhood, renowned as the "king of street food" with diverse offerings, including panipuri, papri chat, dum aloo, and Jhalmuri.

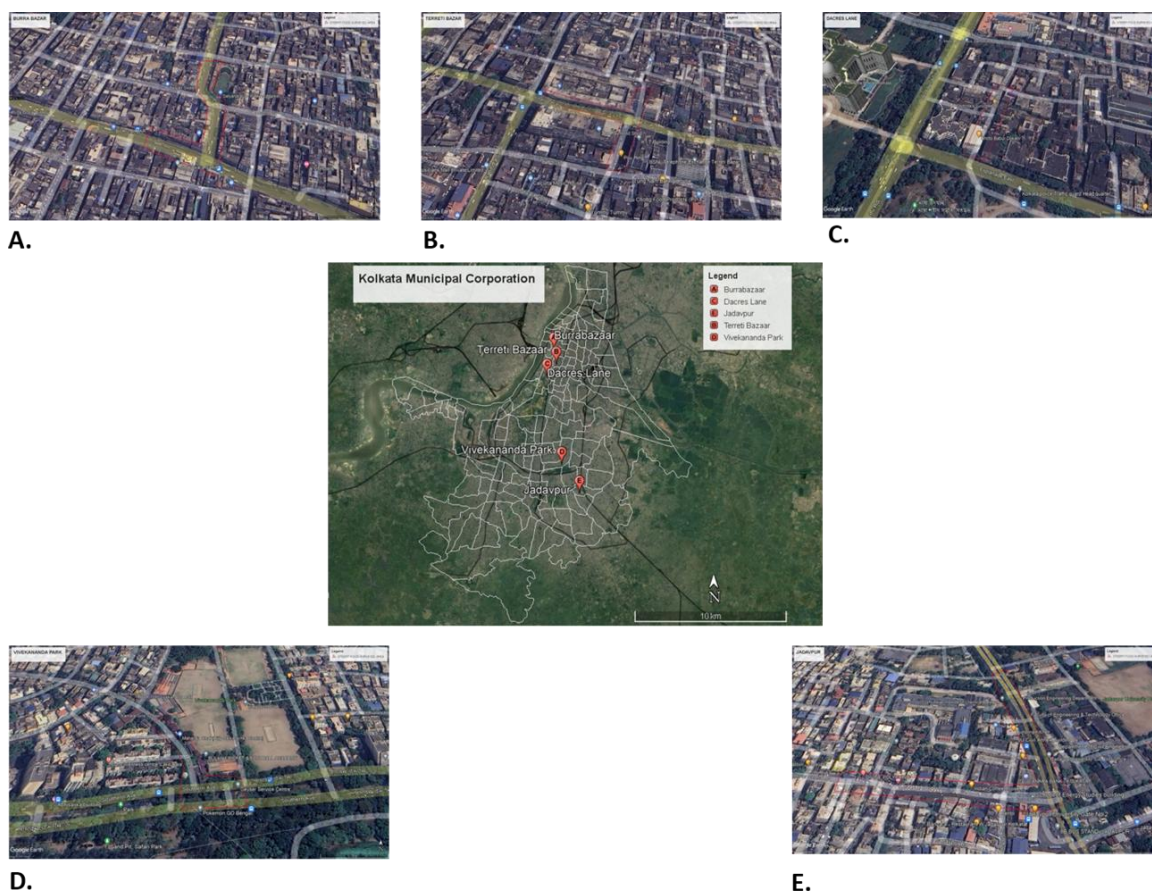


FIGURE 1 LOCATION MAP OF THE FIVE AREAS IN KMC (KOLKATA MUNICIPAL CORPORATION)- A: BURRA BAZAR, B: TIRRETI BAZAR, C: DACRES LANE, D: VIVEKANADA PARK AND E: JADAVPUR

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study included a total of 120 respondents: 60 street food vendors (10 vendors from Burra Bazaar, 10 vendors from Dacres Lane, 20 vendors from Jadavpur, 10 vendors from Tiretti Bazar and 10 vendors from Vivekananda Park) and 60 street food consumers (5 customers from Burra Bazaar, 15 customers from Dacres Lane, 20 customers from Jadavpur, 5 customers from Tirreti Bazar and 15 customers from Vivekananda Park). The selection of the five study areas utilized both stratified sampling and purposive sampling techniques. The choice of specific areas was influenced by factors such as ethnic homogeneity, as seen in the food vendors of

Tirreti Bazar who primarily belong to the Chinese population, or the predominance of businessmen among the street food customers of Burra Bazar or the predominance of students and professors in Jadavpur.

For data analysis qual-quant method has been applied; the quantitative methods involved descriptive statistics, ANOVA while the qualitative methods like SWOT analysis, narrative analysis were employed from the detailed questionnaires, in-depth interviews.

INSIGHTS INTO THE STREET FOOD LANDSCAPE

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

The street food vending landscape in Kolkata is primarily dominated by male vendors (85%). And the highest number of vendors fell within the age group of 43 to 52 years. However, it is worth mentioning that there were no female vendors observed in the younger age group of 23 to 32 years. The predominance of male vendors and the higher representation of vendors in the middle age range may be attributed to various socio-economic factors and cultural norms. It is important to recognize the diverse backgrounds and circumstances that lead individuals to engage in street food vending as a profession.

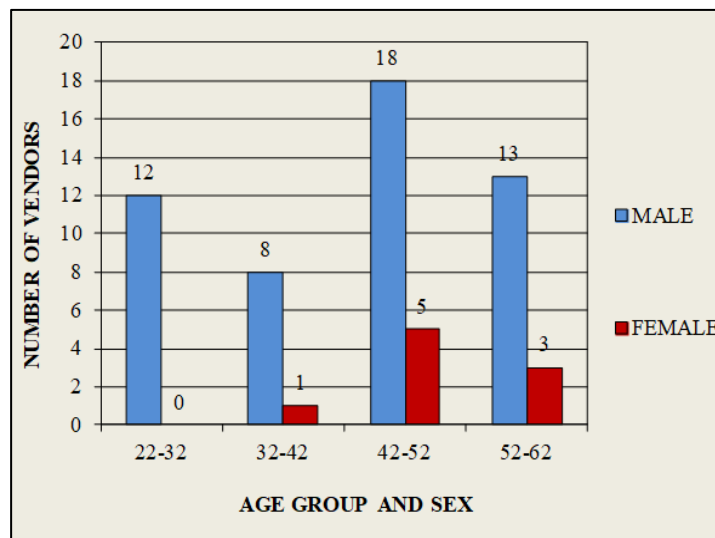


FIGURE 2 AGE-SEX PROFILE OF THE SURVEYED STREET FOOD VENDORS, KOLKATA (SOURCE: PRIMARY SURVEY, 2023)

The data derived sheds light on the educational background of street food vendors in Kolkata. It reveals that the highest percentage of vendors, accounting for 36.67 percent, have received only primary education. This implies that a significant proportion of vendors have completed their basic education, which typically covers foundational knowledge and skills. On the other hand, the lowest percentage of vendors, standing at 13.33 percent, has received tertiary education. This suggests that a smaller number of vendors have pursued advanced education or specialized training and then too are keen in street food vending. The mixed educational levels among street food vendors reflect the diversity within the industry and the varying

backgrounds of individuals involved. It highlights that while formal education may not be a prerequisite for entering the street food business, vendors with primary education do form the majority.

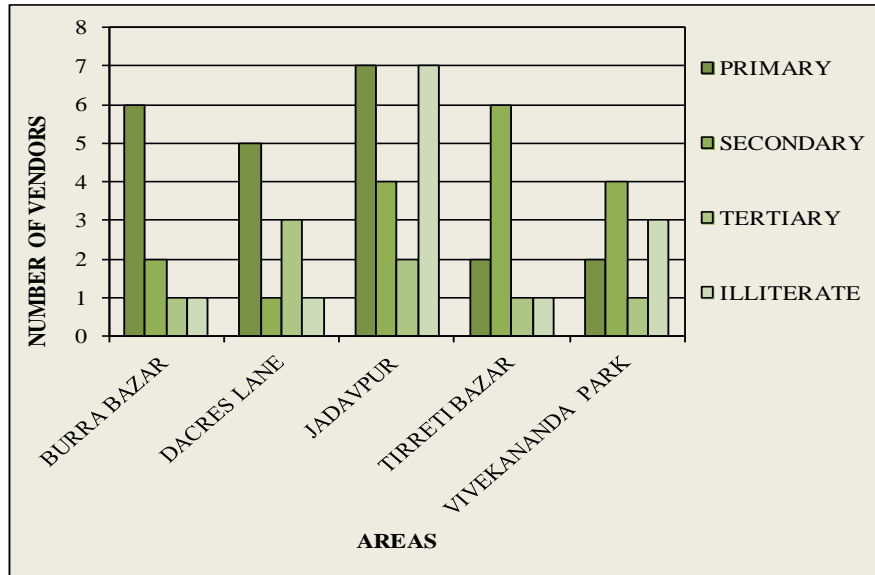


FIGURE 3 EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF THE SURVEYED STREET FOOD VENDORS, KOLKATA (SOURCE: PRIMARY SURVEY, 2023)

Street vendors in Kolkata contribute to the city's diverse culinary landscape, with some migrating from rural areas, particularly Bihar, in search of better opportunities. Their arrival brings unique culinary skills and traditional recipes, enriching the local street food scene. Different areas of Kolkata reflect a blend of linguistic and cultural diversity among vendors. In Burra Bazar, Hindu vendors, primarily of Marwari and Bihari origin, add distinctive flavours and predominantly speak Hindi. Dacres Lane and Jadavpur feature Hindu vendors who mostly speak Bengali, showcasing the city's multicultural environment. Tirreti Bazar stands out for its diverse mix, including Bihari Hindus, Bihari Muslims, and individuals of Chinese origin, contributing to unique culinary experiences. Vivekananda Park exhibits a predominantly Hindu and Bengali-speaking vendor community, reflecting Kolkata's inclusive linguistic harmony. Overall, Kolkata's street food vendors highlight the city's cultural richness and inclusivity.

ECONOMIC PROFILE

Earnings among street food vendors in Kolkata exhibit significant variation, ranging from less than Rs 500 to over Rs 8500 per day, based on data from 60 surveyed vendors. The majority (46.67%) falls within the Rs 500 to Rs 2600 per day income bracket. Notably, 1.67% of vendors earn between Rs 6500 to Rs 8500 per day, primarily in Jadavpur and Vivekananda Park. Some vendors report exceptionally high daily incomes exceeding Rs 50,000, particularly selling momos in Jadavpur and phuchkas in Vivekananda Park. However, within the same locations, there are vendors earning less than Rs 500 per day. Disparities in earnings are influenced by factors like location, food item popularity, marketing strategies, and overall customer footfall. The quality, uniqueness, and demand for specific cuisines also contribute to varying income levels among vendors.

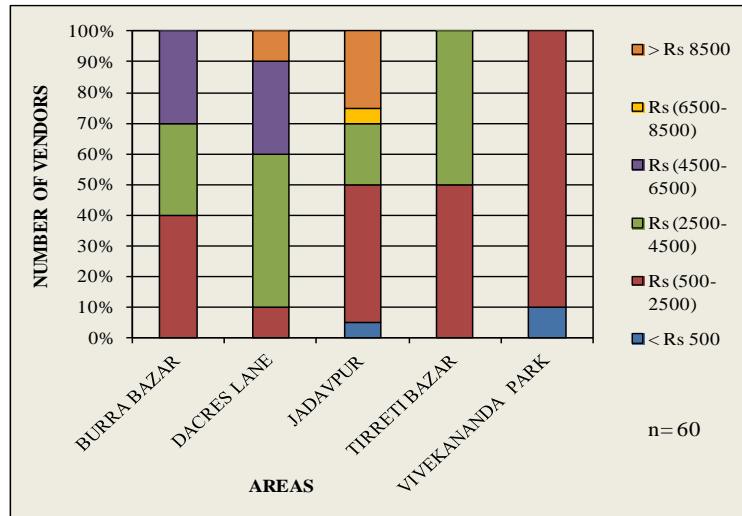


FIGURE 4 DAILY INCOME OF THE SURVEYED STREET FOOD VENDORS, KOLKATA (SOURCE: PRIMARY SURVEY, 2023)

A hypothesis testing is done to determine the relationship between income and education level of the street food vendors.

H0: There is no statistically significant difference among mean daily income of vendors according to their educational qualifications.

H1: There is statistically significant difference among mean daily income of vendors according to their educational qualifications.

Table 1: ANOVA for daily income and educational qualifications of the surveyed street food vendors, Kolkata

ANOVA					
Daily Income					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	9.154E7	3	3.051E7	.514	.674
Within Groups	3.325E9	56	5.938E7		
Total	3.417E9	59			

(Source: Primary Survey, 2023)

The significance value of F (3, 56) is 0.514 which is more than the 0.05. It signifies that the ANOVA test has failed to reject the null hypothesis which means the daily income of the vendors does not change according to their educational qualifications.

WORKING CONDITIONS

The survey on daily working hours among street food vendors in the study area reveals diverse practices. A majority of vendors (65%) work for 6 to 10 hours per day, reflecting a significant time commitment to their businesses. Conversely, a smaller proportion (11.67%) operates for 1 to 5 hours, indicating shorter working durations influenced by factors like ingredient availability or specific target markets. Additionally, 23.33% of vendors dedicate 11 to 15 hours daily, suggesting an extensive time investment, possibly to cater to a larger customer base, meet peak-hour demand, or maximize income potential.

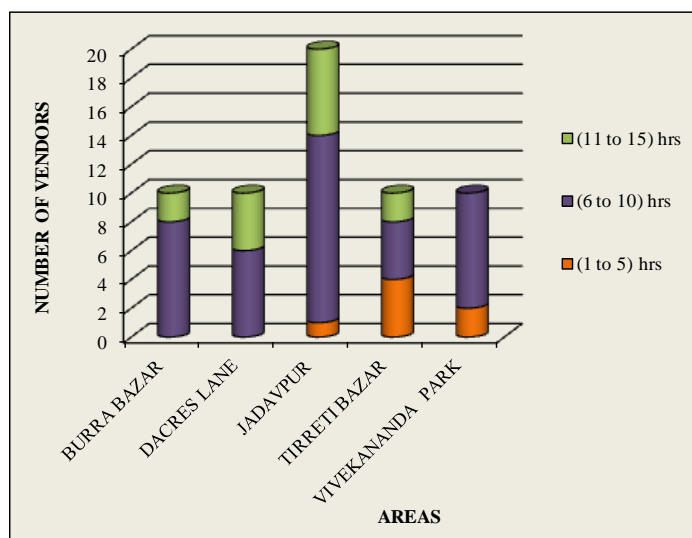


FIGURE 5 DAILY DURATION OF WORK OF THE SURVEYED STREET FOOD VENDORS, KOLKATA (SOURCE: PRIMARY SURVEY, 2023)

In the same survey of 60 street food vendors, 70% acknowledged facing stiff competition from their peers, while 30% reported not experiencing significant competition. The prevalence of competition in the street food industry, common due to close proximity in popular areas, highlights the intense market nature. Challenges include similar offerings, pricing strategies, locational advantages, and customer preferences. To stand out, vendors must differentiate through food quality, unique flavours, excellent customer service, and appealing presentation.

Street food vendors in Kolkata employ diverse approaches to food preparation, with 46.67% preferring on-the-spot cooking, ensuring fresh and immediate service. Additionally, 30% partially prepare food at home and finish it on-site, influenced by factors like convenience. Another 21.67% prepare food at home, reheating if needed, driven by considerations such as time management. Regarding food preparation time, 88.33% prepare food on the same day for peak freshness, while 11.67% prepare the previous night, potentially for time-consuming dishes or early morning demand.

Regarding drinking water sources, 83.33% of vendors use nearby street tap water from the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) for its convenience. Around 13.33% use other sources, including commercial filtered water, emphasizing quality and safety. A small percentage, approximately 3.33%, carries water from home, indicating a preference for personal supply quality. Phuchkawalas and cold drinks makers generally rely on municipal tap water, ensuring safety. Some may opt for filtered or purified water to prioritize hygiene and avoid potential health risks for customers during food preparation.

In terms of daily sales, 33.33% sell food on the same day, prioritizing freshness, while 66.67% do not, possibly influenced by demand, minimizing waste, or cost-effectiveness.

HYGIENE CONDITIONS

The data underscores a minimal usage of gloves (1.67%) among street food vendors in Kolkata, with a substantial majority (98.33%) operating without them. This pattern prevails across most areas, except Burra Bazar, where no vendors were seen with gloves. The notable disparity in hygiene practices calls for attention and intervention to ensure consumer safety, especially in the post-COVID context. Factors contributing to the low glove usage may include limited awareness of hygiene importance, potential cost and availability constraints, adherence to traditional methods, inconsistent regulatory enforcement and concerns related to comfort and dexterity. Addressing these factors is crucial for enhancing hygiene practices in the street food industry after the pandemic.

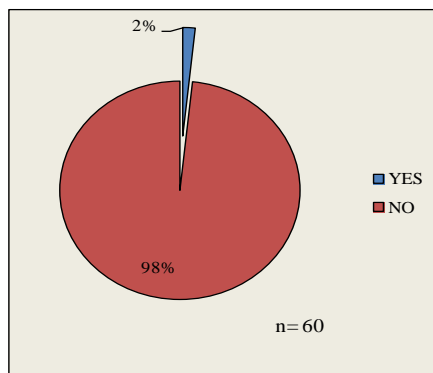


FIGURE 6 USAGE OF GLOVES BY THE SURVEYED STREET FOOD VENDORS, KOLKATA (SOURCE: PRIMARY SURVEY, 2023)

Despite the post-COVID context, there is a serious lack of emphasis on hand hygiene among street food vendors in Kolkata, with only 30% actively engaging in hand washing. A significant majority of vendors, constituting 70%, were observed not washing their hands, especially in areas like Dacres Lane and Tiretti Bazar. This finding underscores the need for targeted interventions to enforce and promote hygienic practices that ensure consumer safety, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic. Reasons for the low percentage of hand washing include a lack of awareness about its importance, inadequate access to clean water and facilities, time constraints due to high customer demand, and insufficient enforcement and monitoring of hygiene practices.

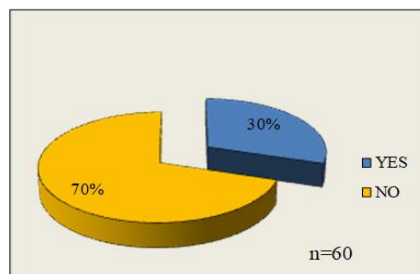


FIGURE 7 HAND HYGIENE (WASHING OF HANDS OR CHANGING OF GLOVES) BY THE SURVEYED STREET FOOD VENDORS, KOLKATA (SOURCE: PRIMARY SURVEY, 2023)

A substantial majority of street food vendors in Kolkata (66.67%) possess waste disposal facilities, such as dustbins, showcasing a positive trend in waste management practices. However, 33.33% of vendors were observed lacking such infrastructure, with the lowest percentage recorded in Burra Bazar and the highest in Jadavpur. This discrepancy suggests a need for improvement in waste management practices. Variances in waste disposal facilities can be attributed to factors like accessibility to waste management infrastructure, awareness of its importance, and adherence to local regulations. Regions with better waste management systems tend to exhibit higher vendor compliance, emphasizing the role of cleanliness prioritization and regulatory enforcement.

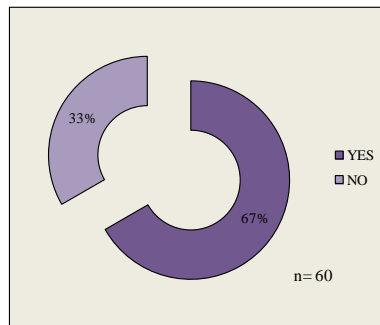


FIGURE 8 PREVALENCE OF PROPER WASTE DISPOSAL AVENUES AMONGST THE SURVEYED STREET FOOD VENDORS, KOLKATA (SOURCE: PRIMARY SURVEY, 2023)

The survey revealed that a majority of street food vendors in Kolkata (58.33%) use umbrellas or provide shade to protect their food items and workspaces from sunlight and rain. This practice is essential in Kolkata's climate, characterized by extreme temperatures and heavy monsoon rains. The use of umbrellas serves various purposes, including preventing food spoilage and contamination by maintaining a cooler environment, providing shelter during rain, and enhancing the visual appeal of food stalls for a more attractive customer experience.

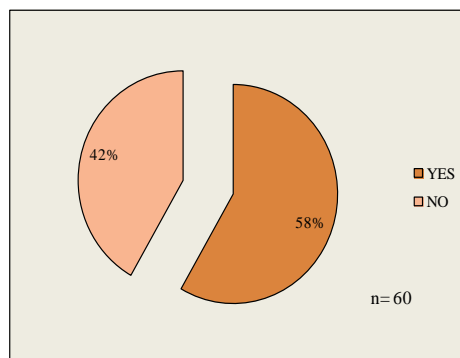


FIGURE 9 USAGE OF ROOFING COVERAGE BY THE SURVEYED STREET FOOD VENDORS, KOLKATA (SOURCE: PRIMARY SURVEY, 2023)

CUSTOMER VIEWPOINT

An overwhelmingly positive sentiment prevails among customers regarding the promotion of street food vending, with 98.33% expressing strong support. This support is likely rooted in an appreciation for the diverse culinary experiences offered by street vendors, coupled with recognition of the socio-economic benefits they bring, including employment opportunities and affordability. In contrast, a minor dissent, representing 1.67% of respondents, exists, with some customers expressing reservations possibly tied to concerns about hygiene, food safety, or perceived impacts on the overall culinary landscape.

When the customers were asked about their perception of the hygiene level of street food, their responses provided interesting insights. The majority of customers, accounting for 61.67%, expressed that they consider street food to be moderately hygienic. This suggests that a significant number of customers have a moderate level of confidence in the hygiene practices followed by street food vendors.

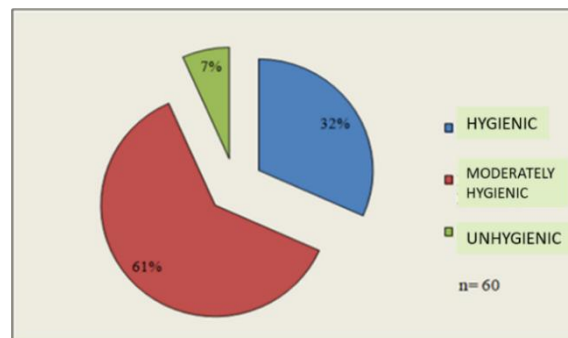


FIGURE 10 HYGIENE PERCEPTION OF THE SURVEYED STREET FOOD CUSTOMERS, KOLKATA
(SOURCE: PRIMARY SURVEY, 2023)

CHALLENGES AMIDST AND AFTER COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

From the survey conducted with 60 street food vendors, it was discovered that the majority of them, accounting for 83.33 percent, reported a decrease in their sales over the past few years. Only a minority of vendors, 16.67 percent, indicated a positive change in their sales. The vendors attributed the decline in sales to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in 2019. The pandemic has significantly affected the street food industry as it has disrupted normal routines, restricted movement, and led to changes in consumer behaviour. Measures such as lockdowns, social distancing, and reduced mobility have resulted in a decline in footfall and overall demand for street food.

The pandemic has created various challenges for street food vendors, including decreased customer confidence, restrictions on outdoor dining, and limited opportunities for events and gatherings where street food is often popular. Additionally, changes in consumer preferences, with a growing emphasis on health and safety concerns, have also influenced the decline in sales.

Socio-Economic Challenges During the Lockdown:

i. *Loss of Livelihood and Income:*

The lockdown in Kolkata brought daily life to a standstill, leading to a profound impact on street food vendors. The once vibrant streets turned desolate, causing an immediate and severe loss of livelihood. The customary hustle and bustle were replaced by empty thoroughfares, resulting in a drastic reduction

in customer interactions and sales. The decreased number of customers prompted some vendors to leave the city and return to their native homes, further exacerbating the challenges faced by those who remained.

ii. *Financial Strain and Economic Vulnerability:*

The informal nature of street vending rendered vendors particularly vulnerable to financial strain. With minimal savings and no access to formal financial safety nets, the sudden cessation of income left many facing economic turmoil. The imperative to adapt to new hygiene standards, including investing in gloves and sanitization, added to their financial challenges.

iii. *Hygiene Concerns and Consumer Distrust:*

The advent of the pandemic heightened hygiene concerns among consumers, leading to a tangible distrust of street food offerings. In response, vendors implemented visible and rigorous hygiene practices, such as the use of gloves and the establishment of sanitization stations. Rebuilding consumer trust became a paramount challenge that demanded proactive and transparent efforts from vendors.

iv. *Supply Chain Disruptions and Increased Costs:*

Disruptions in the supply chain forced street food vendors to rethink their sourcing strategies, leading to increased operational costs. The challenges of procuring ingredients locally, coupled with the need to adapt menus and pricing structures, underscored the financial strain imposed by the pandemic.

Socio-Economic Challenges Post-Lockdown:

i. *Slow Recovery and Uncertain Footfall:*

The post-lockdown phase posed challenges for Kolkata's street food vendors, witnessing a slow recovery due to factors like time restrictions, decreased office goers (work from home - WFH), and lingering fears. Evening curfews limited operating hours, and the WFH trend led to a decline in office-goer footfall. To counter this, vendors adapted by implementing social distancing measures, rigorous hygiene practices, and creating a safe environment to regain customer trust and encourage footfall.

ii. *Persistent Financial Struggles:*

Financial struggles persisted in the post-lockdown period. The commitment to enhanced hygiene practices, while essential for business recovery, added to ongoing operational costs. The use of gloves, frequent sanitization, and other measures became not just a health necessity but a financial investment, further emphasizing the resilience required for economic recovery.

iii. *Adapting to Changing Consumer Behaviour:*

The evolving consumer landscape demanded adaptive strategies from street food vendors. Changes in consumer preferences and expectations necessitated a careful reassessment of offerings. Transparency in hygiene practices, such as the visible use of gloves and sanitization protocols, became integral to assuring customers of their safety and addressing changing consumer behaviours.

iv. *Regulatory Compliance and Operational Changes:*

Ongoing government regulations and guidelines continued to impact street food vendors. Compliance with social distancing measures, hygiene protocols, and other regulatory requirements necessitated operational changes. Vendors adjusted seating arrangements, modified business hours, and invested in safety measures, including the meticulous use of gloves and sanitization stations, to align with evolving regulations.

v. *Digital Transformation Challenges:*

The digital transformation adopted by some vendors during the lockdown presented its own set of challenges. Establishing an online presence and managing deliveries required technological adaptation, all while ensuring the preservation of hygiene standards. Vendors had to strike a delicate balance,

integrating digital platforms with their commitment to visible hygiene practices, including the use of gloves and regular sanitization.

Meticulous Emphasis on Hygiene Practices:

The socio-economic challenges faced by Kolkata's street food vendors, during and after the COVID-19 lockdown, are complex and nuanced, with a particular focus on the profound impact of heightened hygiene practices. This examination delves into the meticulous details of how street food vendors adapted to and prioritized enhanced hygiene, including the meticulous use of gloves and stringent sanitization measures, as an integral component of their operations.

- a) ***Use of Gloves:*** Street food vendors in Kolkata adapted by incorporating the use of gloves into their daily operations. Whether handling ingredients, preparing dishes, or serving customers, the visible presence of gloves became a reassuring symbol of hygiene. Vendors meticulously adhered to glove protocols, changing them regularly to maintain cleanliness and prevent cross-contamination.
- b) ***Sanitization Stations:*** To address heightened hygiene expectations, vendors established sanitization stations at strategic points in their setup. These stations equipped customers and vendors alike with hand sanitizers, emphasizing the collective responsibility for hygiene. The continuous sanitization of hands, surfaces, and utensils became a routine practice, fostering a safer environment for all.
- c) ***Transparent Food Preparation:*** Street food vendors, cognizant of consumer concerns, implemented transparent food preparation practices. The use of clear shields and glass barriers allowed customers to witness the hygiene measures in action, instilling confidence in the safety of their food. This transparency became an essential element in rebuilding consumer trust and dispelling lingering doubts.
- d) ***Enhanced Cleaning Protocols:*** Street food vendors implemented enhanced cleaning protocols for utensils, surfaces, and cooking equipment. Regular disinfection routines became integral to their operations, ensuring a sanitized environment for food preparation. This meticulous attention to cleanliness not only aligned with regulatory requirements but also showcased a commitment to maintaining a hygienic space.
- e) ***Disposable Packaging:*** To minimize contact and potential transmission, many street food vendors transitioned to disposable packaging. This not only addressed hygiene concerns but also demonstrated a proactive approach in adapting to changing consumer preferences. The use of biodegradable or eco-friendly disposable materials contributed to both hygiene and environmental sustainability.
- f) ***Temperature Checks for Staff:*** In addition to customer-focused hygiene measures, street food vendors implemented health checks for their staff. Regular temperature checks were conducted to ensure that those involved in food preparation were in good health. This proactive approach aimed to create a safer working environment and prevent any potential spread of illness.
- g) ***Collaboration with Health Authorities:*** Some vendors collaborated with local health authorities to ensure that their hygiene practices aligned with recommended guidelines. Seeking guidance and participating in health and safety training programs became a way for vendors to stay updated on the latest protocols and demonstrate their commitment to public health.
- h) ***Community Awareness Initiatives:*** Street food vendors actively engaged in community awareness initiatives to educate customers about the hygiene measures in place. Signage, pamphlets, and online platforms were utilized to communicate the steps taken to ensure food safety. This transparent communication further built trust and encouraged customers to return with confidence.
- i) ***Innovations in Contactless Payments:*** To reduce physical contact during transactions, street food vendors explored innovative solutions for contactless payments. Whether through mobile payment apps or QR code-based systems, these adaptations not only enhanced hygiene but also showcased a forward-thinking approach in aligning with modern payment preferences.

- j) **Customer Feedback Mechanisms:** Vendors established customer feedback mechanisms, encouraging patrons to provide input on hygiene practices. This two-way communication allowed vendors to address any concerns promptly and showcase their responsiveness to customer expectations. It also facilitated a continuous improvement loop in refining hygiene standards.
- k) **Community Collaboration on Hygiene Awareness:** Recognizing the interconnectedness of their businesses with the community, some street food vendors engaged in collaborative efforts to raise hygiene awareness. Partnering with local community organizations, they organized workshops or events to disseminate information on best practices for food safety and hygiene.
- l) **Investment in Hygiene Training:** Acknowledging the importance of staff education, vendors invested in hygiene training programs. This involved educating staff members on the proper use of gloves, sanitization techniques, and overall hygiene best practices. Empowering staff with knowledge contributed to a culture of cleanliness within the vendor operations.

FROM THE GRASSROOT

In the Times of India (TOI) article on “How Kolkata’s famed street food biz is battling the pandemic odds” by Mitra (2021), delves into the challenges and transformations faced by Kolkata’s street food business during the pandemic, focusing on Dilip Shaw, the renowned phuchkawala at Vivekananda Park. Dilip, now able to sustain his family with daily sales reaching Rs 1,500, notes this as the best financial position since the first lockdown. He reflects on the initial optimism post the first wave, expecting recovery akin to the 2008 financial crisis. However, subsequent waves, shattered those hopes, leaving vendors apprehensive about future COVID waves and lockdowns. The article also addresses the regret among street food vendors for not embracing online food delivery apps earlier. Dilip acknowledges the reluctance, citing normal business conditions and a traditional aversion to technology. The realization of the importance of internet-based services came after the demonetization in 2016, but the delay has had consequences. While restaurants adapted and survived COVID lockdowns through apps, many street food vendors, lacking awareness, are paying the price for not going digital earlier.

Furthermore, the interactions made through the surveys highlighted the decreased footfall of office-goers, a significant customer base. With the introduction of work-from-home facilities, numerous vendors in areas like Dacres Lane experienced a decline, leading to some fleeing the city. Office closures and the absence of trains further impacted daily-wage labourers, contributing to the challenges faced by street food vendors in Kolkata. Similar situation was seen in all other pockets too, where the footfall of the customers declined; but with the passage of time the confidence was back in place and the office-goers, students, tourists all flocked back to their favourite street food joints without much apprehensions.

COPING STRATEGIES IN THE KOLKATA STREET FOOD SCENARIO

- a. **Diversification of Offerings:** Street food vendors diversified their offerings, introducing new items with longer shelf life to cater to the increased demand for takeaways and home deliveries.
- b. **Digital Integration:** Vendors embraced digital platforms for food delivery and marketing, reaching a wider customer base beyond local foot traffic.
- c. **Hygiene Protocols:** Implementation of stringent hygiene practices, such as using gloves and establishing sanitization stations, to address consumer concerns and rebuild trust.
- d. **Collaboration and Community Support:** Street food vendors formed alliances, sharing resources and collectively addressing challenges during the pandemic.
- e. **Innovations in Packaging and Presentation:** Vendors invested in creative and secure packaging solutions, enhancing the visual appeal of takeaway orders.

Financial Assistance Programs: Government and NGOs designed and implemented financial assistance programs, providing targeted relief through grants or low-interest loans for street food vendors.



FIGURE 11 SWOT ANALYSIS OF THE KOLKATA STREET FOOD SCENARIO

CONCLUSION

In Kolkata, the street food industry serves as a vibrant cultural and economic cornerstone, offering a diverse array of flavours that resonate with locals and visitors alike. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed formidable challenges, causing a significant downturn in sales and altering consumer habits. However, amidst adversity, street food vendors in Kolkata showcase resilience, adaptability, and an unwavering commitment to their craft.

Recognizing the importance of the street food industry, it becomes imperative to acknowledge its role not only in the culinary landscape but also in the socio-economic fabric of the city. The industry not only caters to gastronomic preferences but also provides livelihoods for numerous vendors who contribute to the city's dynamic spirit.

As the industry navigates the path to recovery, there is a pressing need for comprehensive support mechanisms. This includes strategic policy interventions, financial aid, and educational initiatives to equip street food vendors with the tools needed to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic. Upholding the street food industry's resilience is not just about preserving culinary traditions; it is a testament to the spirit of survival and the integral role these vendors play in the cultural and economic tapestry of Kolkata.

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