



## The impact of Class on Street Food Vendors in the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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### Abstract

Situations of crisis leave varying impacts on differential groups of people in society. The COVID-19 pandemic brought forth the role of class and how belonging to class divisions determined their chances of survival amidst the chaos. This paper seeks to understand the situation of street food vendors in Kolkata and how their experiences and coping mechanisms differed from other food entrepreneurs from a higher socio-economic background. The intersectionality of class and gender further results in differential experiences which has also been explored in this paper.

**Keywords:** *Street food vendors, class, capital, coping mechanisms, COVID-19.*

### Introduction

Vendors are part of the informal economy and can be classified into vendors selling food, household utilities, flowers and clothes. (Dalwadi, 2010: 88) Street food vendors are an integral part of the urban landscape and form about one-fifth of the total number of street vendors in India as per data collected by the FSSAI (2016:3). They can be understood as subsistence entrepreneurs (Schoar, 2010:59) who sell goods and services from public spaces. They in turn, provide food and services to the urban populace at affordable prices and from convenient locations. (Bhowmik, 2005:2256) They constitute part of the informal sector which is why their livelihood is insecure characterized by a lack of worker rights and safeguards of any kind. (Hart, 1973:62) This renders them vulnerable in many situations. Their livelihood is also considered debatable due to problems such as overcrowding, barriers to traffic and pedestrian movement and most importantly, illegal occupancy of public spaces. (Sarkar, 2016:326) They are faced with harassment, eviction and confiscation of goods and equipment from local authorities. Street food vending can be observed majorly in two spaces, that is on the sidewalks and pavements and secondly, in fairs or melas which take place in public spaces. The former constitutes a more permanent form of vending which occurs through the year while fairs illustrate a case of occasional or seasonal vending.

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 brought the world to a standstill. Albeit all individuals were affected by it, the pandemic wreaked more havoc for some social groups than others. This brings forth questions of inequality and power positions in society. We have heard about the rich purchasing hospital beds and oxygen supplies while the poor visited hospitals only to receive no help due to the sheer dearth of resources required to cope with the gargantuan pandemic. The work of street food vendors as micro-entrepreneurs makes them a participants in face-to-face, regular interactions; with consumers, local authorities, and fellow vendors. However, such interactions had come to a standstill due to the pandemic. Underlying the



experiences of street food vendors is the larger political structure and actors embedded in it. There is a polarization of classes, and street vendors are considered part of the masses engaged in the informal sector. The minority power- holding and wielding group determine the experiences of the street vendors. This group is constituted by the police officials and ward members of a given area of city. Orders from the government led to complete shutdown of all vending activities. However, street vendors who mostly belong to the lower echelons of society had no means to cope with the pandemic and subsequent closure of their livelihood source. How the pandemic affected the livelihood experiences of street food vendors in Kolkata and how class played a significant role in determining the same forms the key research question for this research paper.

Within the larger group of street food vendors, there is the presence and manifestation of class inequalities that demarcate their experiences. Vendors from a stronger socio-economic background differ from other street vendors. The former are often registered, and their businesses are considered legal in nature. Street food has itself become a lucrative business and, many such as MBA *chaiwala* (News18,2023) and b.tech *panipuriwali* (Jain,2023) have started food vending carts which require higher amounts of investment and resources. Thus, the definition of street vending is also undergoing change and is no longer limited to the lower echelons of society.

The theoretical backing of this paper primarily draws from Ulrich Beck's conception of the risk society (1992:20) which pointed out how different situations of crisis affected people differently based on their position in society. Furthermore, class positions are significant in determining peoples' access to opportunities in life. (Weber, 1922:305) The aspect of global risk through natural and man-made calamities affect all, despite their class divisions. (Beck, 1992:92) However, the impact on people and their ability to deal with the crises is often determined by their wealth and power in society. Economic inequalities became stark during the pandemic when the world was faced by scarcity of resources. The poor had lesser chance of surviving the pandemic since stratification leaves the powerful minority with more resources and amenities. People with higher socioeconomic capital (Bourdieu, 1977:171) were thus, in a better position to deal with the pandemic.

## **Objectives**

The key objective of this paper is to understand the problems of street food vendors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, how their experiences differed from those with higher socio-economic status during the same time frame facilitates the study of the impact of class and how it shapes human lives. Furthermore, women belonging to a weaker economic background implied a dual disadvantage, which has been understood through the intersectionality of class and gender.

## **Methodology**

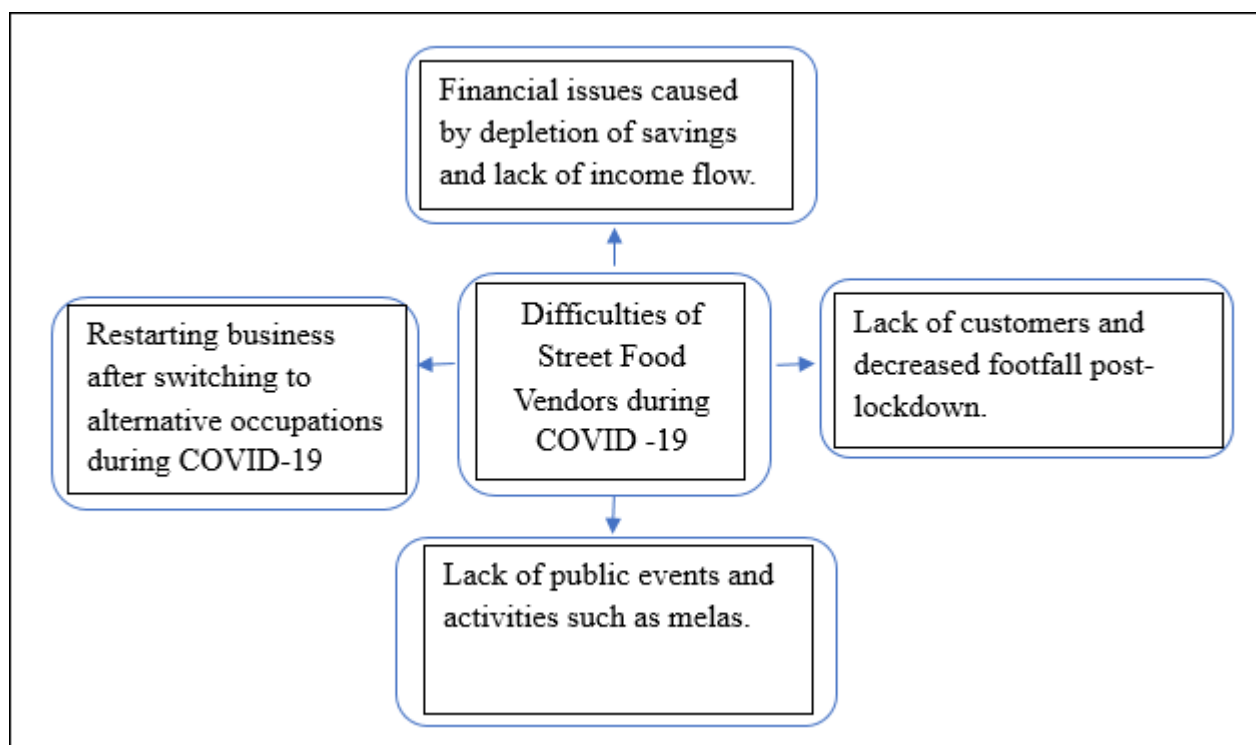
The data and insights provided in this paper largely draw from the author's doctoral research work based on street food vendors as small entrepreneurs operating in the commercially rich areas of Kolkata, such as New Town, Sector V and BBD Bag. With a sample size of 150 respondents, in-depth interviews through convenience and purposive sampling had been conducted with both male and female vendors selling

processed food. <sup>1</sup>Paired up from secondary sources of knowledge, the paper is descriptive in nature trying to understand the differential experiences of people in the contextual backdrop of the pandemic. The propositions have been accompanied by corresponding narratives by the respondents. The research adopts a mixed method approach, drawing insights from the collection of quantitative variables such as income, investment and pricing of items and qualitative data through the experiences and narratives of street food vendors.

### Problems experienced by Street Food Vendors during the pandemic

The problems faced by street food vendors during the pandemic have been summarized as below and have been understood through a four-fold classification. The lack of savings due to low monthly incomes left most in a state of serious financial drain. Their main consumer base was also experiencing lockdown, and even after the lockdown was lifted, people hardly left their houses in fear of contracting the fatal virus. Thirdly, the pandemic was uncertain in nature and continued for an indefinite period of time. Vendors were left confused whether to switch to another occupation, with many engaging temporarily with other jobs while most lived with the meagre sales they made.

Figure 1. Problems of street food vendors



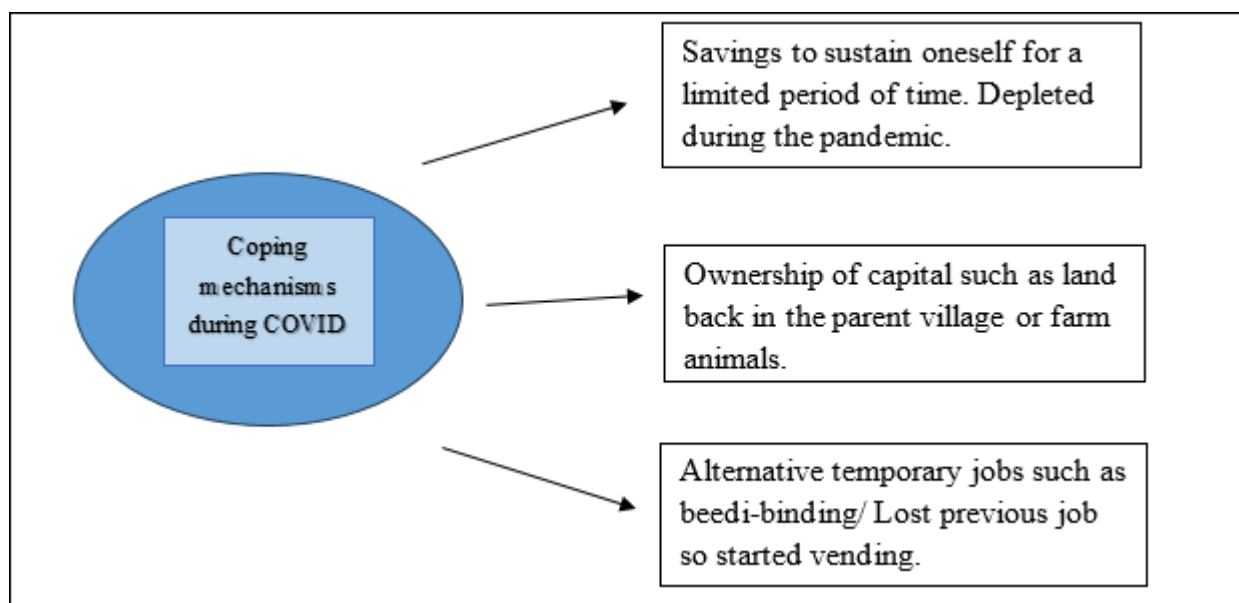
Under the rubric of the informal economy, lies a much more complex relationship between social groups and political structures. Politics form a part of all social groups and their relationships with other social groups.

<sup>1</sup> Street food can broadly be divided into unprocessed consisting of raw, uncooked food such as fruits and vegetables while processed food are those which have undergone at least one stage of processing or cooking.

(Ashraf & Sharma, 1983:3) It is present in all social institutions-within the family, marriage, religion, and media. Power relations manifest themselves in the street as a space. Street food vendors often face difficulties trying to hold and maintain their position in the street as small entrepreneurs. The street is a site of politics and hosts a myriad of social interactions on a day-to-day basis. The street has its own character and changes its nature at different points of time. For street vendors, it is their site of work and source of livelihood. It is the street that was rendered empty during the pandemic with people inside their houses in fear of the virus that could kill thousands. The street vendors lost their livelihood overnight who were already part of the urban poor struggling to make ends meet (Bhadra, 2021:2)

Most vendors did not have sufficient savings to last them throughout the lockdown. However, as a form of contingency plans, some vendors engaged in farming on lands they owned back in their village. A male vendor said that she had two cows back in his hometown and he sustained himself by selling milk during the lockdown. Thus, a few went back to animal husbandry while some relied on other informal sector occupations such as beedi-binding. The figure below shows the various ways in which street food vendors coped with the pandemic and its impact on their livelihood as street food vendors. The presence of alternative occupations, however, were only available to a minority of the sample size. 84.14% of the sample size stated that vending was their only source of income and livelihood, which illustrated their dependence on the occupation and eliminating the stereotype that vending is a temporary and fleeting occupation for many.

Figure 2: **Street vendors' approach to COVID-19**



Some also underwent a transition within the same occupation. A respondent selling fruit chaat said that he had temporarily transitioned to selling fruits and vegetables, that is, raw and unprocessed food. He had stopped travelling to and vending at high regular location, that is, near BBD Bag and limited his vending activities to around his residence. Thus, it also encompassed a change in the nature of selling, since he had

moved from being a static vendor to being a mobile vendor, who moved from locality to locality near his house to sell fruits and vegetables.<sup>2</sup> Many street food vendors are also immigrants and were unable to return to their hometowns to their families. The hardships faced by the street food vendors were not ameliorated once the lockdown was lifted. The reason lay in the fear and wariness regarding the consumption of food cooked outside of the home. Street food has often been scrutinized for lack of nutritional value and questionable health and sanitation standards, and the pandemic only increased scepticism regarding the same. The sales of street vendors selling goods and services apart from food thus faced lesser difficulties to re-store their consumer base after the lockdown was lifted. People continued to purchase unprocessed or raw food such as grains, fruits and vegetables since they constitute basic nutritional requirements. Processed or cooked food vendors further suffered in this situation. However, many vendors also said that the pandemic was also characterized by the shift of consumers who preferred to buy food from larger supermarkets in Kolkata like Bigbazar and Spencers, rather than purchasing from the vendors in local markets. The impact of shopping malls on the sales of street vendors studied by Sumana Roy (2011:297) pointed out how the organized retail sector negatively affected the hawker economy of the city.

Many individuals lost their previous jobs due to the pandemic. One such respondent said that he had to relocate from another city to Kolkata since he lost his previous job at an eatery. In Kolkata, he started to work as an employee at a juice vending stall. In such cases, COVID caused people to change from one job to another. People vending at various fairs across the city also faced a number of difficulties. All events had been indefinitely postponed which caused financial trouble for those people who relied heavily on the annual fairs that account for more than half the money they made all round the year. Some expressed their worry and concern regarding the uncertainty of melas. A female vendor selling *achaar* at the Book Fair of 2024 said that she was constantly worrying about whether she and her husband would find future opportunities to conduct vending at upcoming fairs. Her concern was rooted in the problems she faced during the pandemic and also the steadily rising rent in for putting up a stall in fairs. She has two sons, one of whom had to leave their college education to help out in the business.

Social capital proved to be of great advantage for street food vendors. Usually, the street vendors are subject to the exercise of power by local authorities. They are required to pay regular or occasional sums of money in order to conduct vending in public spaces. In the older office localities such as BBD Bag, there were many vendors who had been vending for well over a decade. Some of the businesses were also generational in nature, that is, were being passed on from father to son. One such respondent selling *muri makha* (puffed rice) said that he had been vending in the same location for many years and lived at the vending location as a squatter. He received cooperation and assistance during the pandemic from police officials in the form of food. He said that the police provided *khichdi* which he did not prefer, especially since the meals lacked meat. The aforementioned narrative brought forth the role and significance of social capital and how networks with local authorities helped vendors to survive during the pandemic. The case shows that despite lacking

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<sup>2</sup> Street vendors can be broadly classified on the location of vending into stationary, mobile, and semi-mobile vendors. Stationary vendors conduct their business from a fixed vending setup each day, characterized by relatively immovable vending equipment. Mobile vendors have light paraphernalia which they carry from location to location in order to sell their goods and services. Semi-mobile vendors are those who sometimes change their vending location depending upon the density of crowds in order to enable optimum business.



economic capital, the presence and strengthening of social capital. During the pandemic, such businesses were in a better position to survive and sustain themselves through accumulated savings and also changing the mode of their business operations such as switching to online modes. Thus helped the vendor survive in the politics of the street. However, vendors with weaker background often lack education, especially regarding technical know-how thus leading to the complete closure of the business.

A female respondent running a home-based bakery business was interviewed at a privately organized mela. She said she had the hobby of baking since she was in college, but had stopped after she got married. During the pandemic, she started baking again, and her friends and family encouraged her to start this business. The kind of foods being sold in such kind of businesses also differed. For instance, they sold bakery goods or handmade chocolates which are often considered parts of leisurely activities. Furthermore, this group of vendors were also aware about the potential of online platforms and social media, and they drew from these resources to continue their business during the pandemic. Street food vending also served as the sole viable way to earn a livelihood. For instance. Two friends started a *momo* vending stall in the Sector V area of Kolkata after they lost their jobs during the pandemic. Thus, there emerged a stark difference between the impact the pandemic had on individuals from varying socio-economic backgrounds. Although the lockdown was lifted after three months, the street remained empty, and workplaces remained closed negatively impacting the main consumer base of the street food vendors. The majority of vendors (80.79%) of the sample size re-opened their businesses immediately after the lockdown was lifted due to the dearth of finances. This also put them at an increased risk of contracting the virus but most respondents said that they did so to earn their daily subsistence. The remainder of the sample had resources and savings at their disposal, that enabled them to keep their business operations stopped or limited for an additional period of time till the spread of the virus decreased further. A female respondent in the Sector V area of Kolkata, which is a bustling office locality with a number of private corporate offices stated that the footfall has still not returned to its original number.

### **The role of gender- dual disability.**

Gender is a source of dual oppression and subjugation. Women belonging to lower social classes or weaker financial backgrounds are at a greater disadvantage and face dual oppression. There is an invisibilization of women in the sphere of street food vending. It is an irony since cooking is considered the domain of women and the latter are associated with cooking, cleaning, and nurturing responsibilities. Women in street food vending are also assigned similar tasks. Ownership however, often lies with their male counterparts such as husbands and in-laws. Many male *phuchka* sellers said that either their wives or mothers woke up early in the morning to prepare the dough and then the *phuchkas* which the former then carried to the vending set up. Thus, most of the work was being done by women on a regular basis who were entirely absent at the location and time of selling, leading to an invisibilization of women. Women are often kept away from public spaces and streets continue to be dominated by men. (Chowdhry, 2014:42) Vending setups may also be owned by another individual, who employs or hires women in the vending setup in exchange for a salary. In both these cases, women lack agency regarding decision-making about and around the business and also monetary tasks involved in street food vending. Women hired in street food vending stalls faced additional

harassment from fellow vendors. A female respondent in sector V working at a *bhaater hotel* said that the neighboring vendors treated her and the other workers badly, and was also being yelled at for throwing leftover water in the drain on the opposite side of the street. She said that she was only doing what her employer had instructed her to do. The owner of the business, in such cases, only visited the stall for a few hours each day. Working at such stalls was often not the sole decision of the woman herself. Some women went back to their home village and engaged in household work or *beedi-binding* for the duration of the lockdown. Older women having more years of experience had better relations with the employers.

A different set of cases emerged when women belonging to a stronger economic background operating as food entrepreneurs in fairs were interviewed. Most of them were educated, either high school or college graduates and the initial amount of investment in order to start the business was also higher, sometimes amounting to one to one and half lakh. These women were entrepreneurs who had started their businesses from the space of the home, many of them available on online platforms. The distinguishing factor was that most belonged to higher socio-economic backgrounds and had access to education. Many had earlier worked in formal sector jobs, which they had left either after marriage or after they had children. The pandemic and the corresponding quarantine provided them the time and opportunity to explore their hobbies. (Freire, Pereira, Faria, Marinho, Alves, Banhidi & Uvinha, 2025:19) Leisure time thus became a source for business ideas. Friends and family members gave such respondents the idea to start their own food business. These women found the idea suitable because it also enabled them the flexibility of working hours in order to balance between their work and household responsibilities, including child rearing. This group also had access to social media and actively promoted their business on social media, and also used the same to procure raw materials and other components required. They engaged in vending on an occasional basis in fairs (*melas*) and exhibitions across and outside the city. Fairs organized by the government usually had more self-help groups who businesses selling food such as *achaar, nimki, bori and pithe*, while privately-organized fairs hosted individual entrepreneurs.

## **Conclusion**

Almost five years after the pandemic, the consumer base for street food vendors has still not returned to becoming the same as it was before the virus struck. Footfalls in office localities are lower, mainly due to flexible modes of work available in many workplaces. Employees are required to come in three to four days of the week that greatly impacted sales for tea stalls and stalls selling meals such as rice, lentils, and curries. However, street vending has also provided a means for earning a livelihood for many when they lost their source of employment due to the pandemic. The precautionary measures adopted during the pandemic such as wearing gloves, washing hands and maintaining an overall standard of hygiene has continued even after the pandemic. The COVID-19 once again proved the lack of security involved in informal sector occupations like street food vending. Post the pandemic, the PM SVANidhi scheme (Prime Minister's Street Vendor's Atma Nirbhar Nidhi scheme) was launched in the year 2020 in order to provide loans at very low rates of interest. (Manicktala & Jain, 2020:553) However, most vendors interviewed were unaware of the scheme and therefore could not benefit from it. Thus, the formulation of welfare policies should focus on implementation



and awareness. Street vendors are part of ground-level politics but are often excluded from decisions concerning them.

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