

Eating on the Run

by Veena Gokhale

Dhanaji Shinde, a street food vendor in Pune, India, has found a permanent spot for his food cart on a corner of a busy marketplace in the heart of the city. He has been selling *bhel-puri*, a tongue-tickling snack, from this profitable perch for the last 15 years. Shinde dropped out of school in Grade 3, when his father died. His impoverished circumstances forced him to migrate from his village to Pune, in search of a job.

After doing several odd jobs, he found his niche as a short order cook in a small restaurant. By the age of 20, he had accumulated enough savings and business acumen to apply for a vendor's licence. "I am happy being self-employed," he says, "There are problems, of course, such as recent price increases, but I still manage to break even."

Mr. Shinde is fairly typical of the 4,000 odd street vendors who operate in this rapidly expanding (pop. 2.5 million), highly industrialized city, 200 kilometres southeast of Bombay. Shinde, however, belongs to the comparatively lucky minority of licenced vendors - only 1,007 in all. Unlicenced vendors are vulnerable to fines, confiscation of goods, and interference from the police and municipal authorities. And all the vendors are prey to a host of problems like lack of water, shortage of space, inadequate sewage and garbage collection facilities, and the consequent health hazards of unhygienically prepared and served food.

Until last year, few statistics were available on this enterprising section of the informal sector, even though the municipality had received nearly 9,000 applications for licences from street food vendors. Sensing this void, Dr Meera Bapat, a Pune-based researcher and academic, decided to conduct a study, which would find out more about the scale of this activity and its social and economic implications. "I saw street food vending as an easy-to-enter, non capital-intensive industry that was catering to an important need in the city," she says. "Studies conducted in some Far Eastern and African countries have earmarked street food vending as particularly for women. Eating street food is now beginning to catch on in India as well."

Funded by IDRC, and under the supervision of Dr A.P. Kulkarni, Director of the Centre of Studies in Social Sciences, Pune, the study was published in October 1990. "We had to start from scratch, with a census of the street food vendors," says Yashwant Thakar, a researcher who did the actual fieldwork for the study. This meant traversing the city streets and often going back to the same spot at different times during the day in order to record all the diverse vending activities.

CHANGING CLIENTELE

Mandai, the marketplace where Shinde operates, is a case in point. Every morning, this square fills up with vendors who hawk breakfast food to small businessmen who work and live in the same locality. Snack sellers like Shinde come here in the early evening, catering mainly to shoppers and families. Later in the night the mood changes as a dozen carts do brisk business selling bread, spicy scrambled eggs, and fried fish to middle and lower class men who frequent the cheap bars in this area.

Other vendors have permanent kiosks and occupy entire streets that exude an upbeat ambience. They are usually located near a public place, like a park or a cinema, and sell more expensive items, including fruit juices and ice-cream, to a well-heeled clientele. Not only are these kiosks licenced, but a large number are owned by officials of municipal corporations.

In sharp contrast to these vendors are the groups of poor women who sell home cooked meals, dirt cheap, to working class people. Squatting on rain-soaked earth, under a flickering street light, they vary their servings according to the money that their customers can afford to pay on a particular day.

Alka, a flower seller who earns a pittance and sleeps in doorways, says that she can feed herself and her two children only because of this happenchance community kitchen. The majority of the clients are male, and according to the study, eat here because they are without proper shelter or cooking facilities.

"For a large section of the poor, it has become a necessity," says Dr Bapat. "The government, however, views street food as a nuisance and adopts a very arbitrary licencing policy for the vendors." Jamunabai, another street meal vendor, has no licence and says she lives in fear of the frequent police raids.

The census of the street food vendors revealed 199 kiosks and 1382 hawkers selling as many as 95 varieties of food. Of this, a sample of 250 vendors was extensively investigated. The study threw some light on factors like the legal status of the vendors, their level of education, the reasons for starting this activity, the modus operandi, the income generated, the clientele, the environmental hygiene, and food safety and nutritional value. It also showed that although the visible employment of women in this industry was only 13%, in actuality, as paid and unpaid workers they constituted more than 45% of street food vendors.

SURPRISING FINDINGS

The findings relating to food hygiene challenged conventional wisdom. "There is a widely held belief that street food is very unhygienic and spreads disease," says Dr Bapat. "I felt the need for a study that would test these notions." Bacterial analysis of 252 samples of food and water taken from all kinds of street food vendors and restaurants found that restaurant food was no better than street food in terms of contamination.

"Contamination is possible at many points, like an unwashed vegetable garnish on a well-cooked snack," says Dr Bapat. "The street meals, sold under the most unsanitary conditions, were found to be surprisingly uncontaminated, possibly due to the home preparation factor. On the whole, though, street food carries the risk of infection and this problem needs to be addressed."

The study is the first step in improving the lot of street food vendors. Project researchers plan to hold a series of workshops to disseminate the study's results to the vendors as well as to officials, social workers, NGO representatives, and journalists. Seminars will also be held to train the vendors in basic hygiene.

It is evident that street food vending is a small but viable part of the informal sector in Pune. And though this industry is not without its attendant problems, the study also spells out some solutions. First, street food vending must be legitimised. The report notes that, "Since entry into formal jobs is severely restricted in India (particularly at low levels of education), even a small addition to reasonable income-earning opportunities needs to be viewed positively. " This legitimacy is crucial, as public and private loans are frequently needed to start a street vending business. The study also suggests that the municipality adopt a sensible licencing policy and ensure basic amenities to the vendors.

Researchers hope that municipal authorities will act on these proposals and that more attention will come to a long-neglected sector of economic activity. A better and more stable working environment, they say, can contribute not only to the fortunes of the hapless street food vendors but also to the civic health of the city and, in the long run, to the evolving economic policies of India.